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PROTEST and REVOLUTION



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contents

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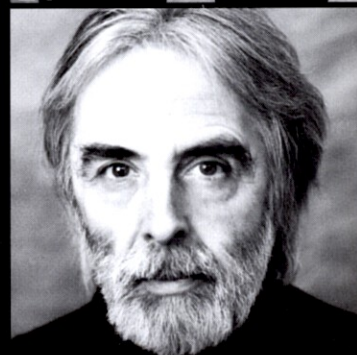
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Protest and Revolution

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity...
—W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*

Note: I undertook to produce for this issue an article on the making of *Salt of the Earth*, but my discovery of James L. Lorence's magnificent and exhaustive book ('The Suppression of *Salt of the Earth*', University of New Mexico Press, 1999) has rendered this superfluous. I was also planning a far longer introduction, but the excellence and very generous responses of my contributors left me no space. I am going to restrict myself to two topics only: global warming and Aulis Sallinen.

Global Warming

One of my most vivid (if probably wildly inaccurate) childhood memories (I must have been fourteen, but a dreadfully introspective and hypersensitive fourteen) is of a newsreel I saw in the cinema of the end of Mussolini. The (perhaps imaginary) image I retain is of the body hanging upside down while people desecrated it with sticks, hatchets, etc... I closed my eyes but it was too late. It haunted my nightmares for years. It seems to me that, ten? twenty? fifty? years from now something very similar will be enacted upon the bodies (dead or alive) of our corporate capitalists when the general populace finally awakens to what they've done to our planet. It will of course be too late – just as Mussolini's death was too late. And it's not my idea of justice: rather, it's the impotent rage of a mob who realize (but refuse to admit it) that it's their fault for not acting much sooner, for remaining what is dubiously called 'innocent': the corpses will be mere scapegoats, and life on our planet will already be beyond repair. According to many reputable scientists, there may be no life on our planet.

The question of course is 'But what *can* we do?', and it's a very difficult one to answer. It's no use appealing to our governments to take the necessary drastic measures to curb pollution and the devastation of the planet: they *rely* on corporate capitalism for funding for their elections. They presumably know what risks they are taking, but apparently their careers are more important. The only hope is popular revolt and a massive swerve to the Left, and that seems most unlikely to happen, or to happen soon enough. The most powerful nation in the world (whose participation would be essential) has a president who 'doesn't believe' in global warming. It is also a nation from which the Left has been effectively eradicated: its voters are offered only a choice between a moderate Right and an extreme (or immoderate) one. Canada is not that much better, with a (very moderate) socialist party that seems primarily concerned with not offending anybody. It is not just the United States that is the enemy. The people of my own adopted country are either ignorant of the issues or simply so uncaring that they elected a conservative government, with entirely predictable results. So Canada has joined the United States in its inexorable progress towards universal devastation. Meanwhile, as climate change escalates, temperatures rise, 'natural' disasters (which are anything but natural) become more frequent and more extreme, corporate capitalism sees to it that its ever more mystified populace are deluded into what is generally regarded as happiness, with the availability of more and more gadgetry, newer and newer fashions, 'the latest', with which we all have to keep up, rock, pop, TV sitcoms, outpourings of emptier and ever more repetitive Hollywood sex comedies, crazy comedies, horror, torture, dumbing down... And on we go to the ending of all life on our planet. The time for socialist revolution is now, not when it is too late. Tell your neighbours. And ask your candidates how they relate to the corporations.

Aulis Sallinen: a composer for our time

I read or heard recently (I'm no longer sure where or from whom) of 'the death of classical music' (which seems to me infinitely more important, as our inheritance, than the death of cinema, on which it has a start of several hundred years), with Stravinsky named as 'the last great composer'. No one admires Stravinsky's music (as opposed to certain aspects of the man, such as his political 'innocence' – as Orson Welles tells us somewhere, a very dubious commodity) more than I do, but I believe the statement to be premature, perhaps based merely upon ignorance. Stravinsky died more than thirty years ago. The title of 'last great composer' may perhaps be more fittingly applied to the greatest Finnish composer (with all due respect to Sibelius), Aulis Sallinen, who is still very much with us and two years younger than myself: the composer of an extraordinary *oeuvre* that includes

(so far) eight symphonies, six operas, five string quartets, a violin and a cello concerto, and numerous shorter pieces. What is he doing in the introduction to an issue of a film magazine dedicated to 'Protest and Revolution'? He is present because those are precisely what his music is about. (All the above works are available on CDs except his latest opera, *King Lear*, which will doubtless join them soon; one opera, *Palatsi*, a satirical assault on power, is also out on DVD). 'The last great composer'? – there is certainly an air of despair in his music, along with the rage and the protest – music that is, in the widest sense, certainly political, which what seem to me its obvious if distant influences, Sibelius (or perhaps simply the Nordic inheritance, the desolation of *Tapiola*) and Stravinsky (for his rhythmic and harmonic freedom and experimentation), were not. I get up around five every morning and by six I'm usually listening to music on my headphones. A few mornings ago I suddenly realized that tears were streaming down my cheeks, without my having been aware of it. The tears were occasioned by Sallinen's fourth symphony. 'Pure music', without any acknowledged programme, it seemed to sum up so much of what I've been needing lately: music of immense power and strength, that simultaneously acknowledges both despair and determination – without optimism, but with a refusal to give up the struggle.

It is music that absolutely refuses the kind of uplift, optimism and positive energies that have sustained us in the past: they are no longer available to us except as cherished memories. We cannot today expect any equivalent of an Ode to Joy, a *Marriage of Figaro*, a 'Great C Major': our world no longer sustains them – which is not of course to suggest that we should stop listening to them: in a better world, if any of us live to see one, they will resume their rightful places in human experience. Today they seem reminders of something we have lost, a phenomenon we called civilization, with all its inequalities and inequities alongside its richness and its creativity. What remains today seems primarily a reminder of the last days of the Roman Empire, but worldwide.

What is striking about Sallinen's music is precisely its fragmentariness. He himself sees his works (or certain of them) in terms of 'mosaics': they are composed, not of broad melodies, but of fragments juxtaposed and re-formed in different patterns ('*These fragments have I shored against my ruin*'...). He entitled his fifth symphony (a work predominantly characterized by a sense of rage and desolation, and commissioned by an American orchestra with what seems today perfect irony) 'Washington Mosaics'; his most recent string quartet is subtitled 'Pieces of Mosaic'. The eighth symphony, a skeletal masterpiece, is subtitled 'Autumnal Fragments'; it could be described as humanity's final struggle against the all-pervasive, dehumanized percussion, a work without comfort but haunted by the intermittent memory of a lost plenitude, one of its episodes clearly suggesting birdsong in a landscape of desolation. In the fifth symphony one has to wait until some minutes into the third movement before encountering anything that could be called a 'tune'. The music's greatness arises from the continuous reforming, repatterning, rebuilding of the fragments, creating a structure of great power even when it's the power of desolation and despair.

Classical music is not dead yet. It is alive and well and living in Finland, and available to anyone with ears to hear...

...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?
W. B. Yeats (*ibid*)

This is the last issue of CineAction that I shall be editing. I am retiring from the collective but intend to continue writing, in my own time and at my own pace.
—Robin Wood

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE #71: **SEXUALITY AND THE CINEMA**

This issue will explore the representation of sexuality in its various manifestations: the sex symbol, the erotic, the projection of desire, the social construction of gender and sexuality.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and **Richard Lippe** richardlippe12@hotmail.com
Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5

ISSUE #72: This issue is unthemed. We invite papers on all topics and issues in contemporary and historical film and film theory. Short film analyses and book reviews are particularly welcome. Queries may be sent directly to the editor, **Susan Morrison** at the following email: smorr@the-wire.com Publication date is August 07.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILMS OF CITIZEN ACTIVIST MICHAEL MOORE

A MAN ON A MISSION

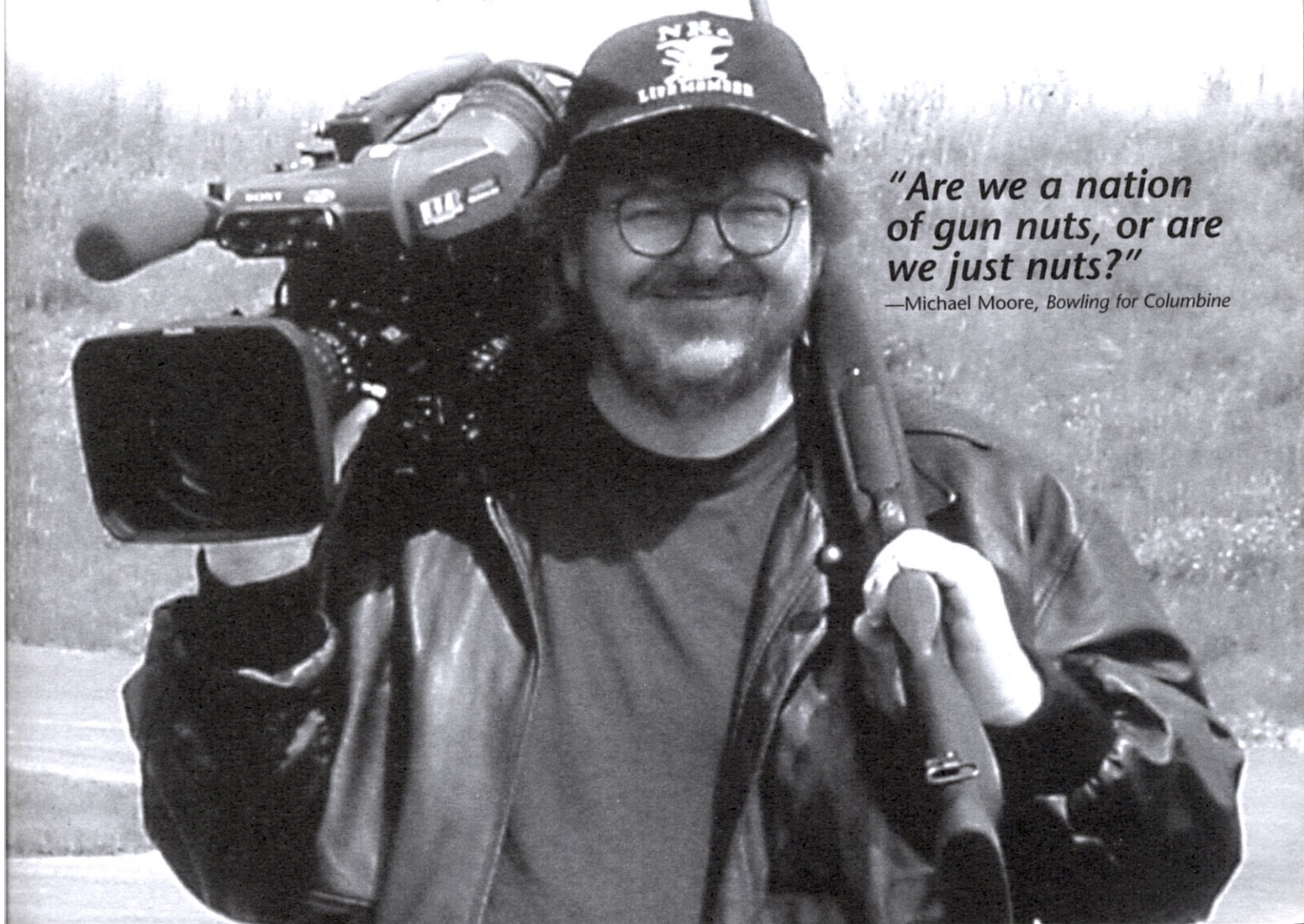
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How Far a Reinvigorated Populism Can Take Us

BY GARRY WATSON My focus in this essay will be on Michael Moore's four documentaries – *Roger and Me* (1989), *The Big One* (1997), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) – with most of my attention being given to the first and third of these, and least to the second. These four films are significant and worth studying for a number of reasons: (i) The size of the audiences they have succeeded in reaching; (ii) the political impact they have had (on which, among other things, see Robert Brent Toplin's useful book on *Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11": How One Film Divided A Nation* [2006]); (iii) and the extent to which they helped prepare the reception for such recent political documentaries as, for example, Errol Morris's *The Fog of War* (2004), Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation* (2005), Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005), David Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and Chris Paine's *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006). It may not be

**"Are we a nation
of gun nuts, or are
we just nuts?"**

—Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine*



redundant to rehearse some of the facts. If *Roger and Me* was more successful at the box office than any documentary that preceded it, Moore went on to break the same record on two subsequent occasions – first with *Bowling for Columbine*, then with *Fahrenheit 9/11*. And as far as the latter is concerned, we get some sense of the excitement that was generated when it first screened in the US by the Foreword that John Berger wrote in 2004 for *The Official "Fahrenheit 9/11" Reader* (while the film was "still playing in hundreds of theaters across America"¹). He begins with these words:

Fahrenheit 9/11 is astounding. Michael Moore's film profoundly moved the artists on the Cannes Film Festival jury, and they voted unanimously to award it the Palme d'Or. Since then it has touched many millions of people. During the first six weeks of its showing in the United States the box office takings amounted to over 100 million dollars, which is, astoundingly, about half of what *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* made during a comparable period. People have never seen another film like *Fahrenheit 9/11*. (ix)

"Astounding" seems to me exactly the right word. It is astounding, first of all, that a documentary (and a political documentary at that) could ever have attained such popularity. And it is even more astounding if we consider *when* it made its appearance: at a time when (in Berger's words) "the daily wall of lies and half-truths," "the conspiracy of silence, [and] the manufactured atmosphere of fear," seemed impenetrable – at least "within the realm of the mass-media" itself (x, xi). It was precisely at that moment that Moore's film achieved its "break-through," nothing less than "an effective and independent intervention into immediate world politics" (x, ix).

But for all the commercial success of his documentaries, and all the praise they have received, Moore's stature as an artist is still something that needs to be argued for. And this is true in spite of what Quentin Tarantino (who headed the Cannes jury that gave first prize to Moore's film) states on one of the featurettes on the *Fahrenheit 9/11* dvd. "Know[ing] all this political crap would be brought up," he whispered the following in Moore's ear:

"I just want you to know it was not because of the politics that you won this award. You won it because we thought it was the best film that we saw." And he [Moore] said, "That means more to me than anything ... If I had wanted to make political statements I would run for office. I want to make movies."

Though Moore seems here to be accepting the rigid distinction between art and politics that Tarantino proposes, my own view is that such a distinction applies to only one of his documentaries so far – to *The Big One*, which has no particular cinematic ambition and is all political statement (even if of an often entertaining and by no means negligible kind). On the other hand, both *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* aspire to be – and largely succeed in being (unlike *Roger and Me*, which has the same aspiration but whose success is more qualified) – both the best films available on their subjects and, simultaneously, powerful political statements.

My guiding assumption, then, is that Moore implicitly asks to be taken seriously both as an artist and also (in John Berger's apt wording) as a kind of "People's Tribune" ("Foreword," xi). My argument will be that this is how he *deserves* to be regarded. My aim is to develop the discussion Moore says he wants: of his films, of course, but also (and at the same time) of some of the issues the films deal with. And since the first one, *Roger and Me*, opens with Moore introducing himself to us, that is where I will start.

Roger and Me (1989)

I thought companies lay off people when they hit hard times. GM was the richest company in the world and it was closing factories when it was making profits in the billions.

—Moore (just over 5 minutes into *Roger and Me*)

The first ten minutes: Self-Portrait of the Artist

The credits are minimal: on an otherwise blank screen, we first see the words "A Dog Eat Dog Films Production," then the title "Roger & Me," then the information "A Film By Michael Moore." The first image is from a family video of children (one of them Moore) at a party, and in voice-over we hear Moore informing us, jokingly, that he "was kind of a strange child. My parents knew early on that something was wrong with me." We see film (again in colour) of someone we assume is his mother as he tells us that "It all began" – that is, began, presumably, to go wrong – "when my mother didn't show up for my first birthday party" This is followed by a black and white photograph of Moore's father and of Moore himself as a tiny tot whom the camera slowly zooms in on (he's in a high chair, a birthday cake with one candle on it in front of him), while the narrative voice explains that "My Dad tried to cheer me up by letting me eat the whole cake," and follows this with the mock-serious confession: "I knew that there had to be more to life than this."

From this intimate glimpse into his personal history (this private photograph of father and son), Moore then begins to introduce a more public history as he cuts abruptly to an old film of a TV show in which we see three smiling women introducing a smiling and singing Pat Boone, while the narrator tells us: "When I was a kid, I thought only three people worked for General Motors: Pat Boone, Dinah Shore" (here we see her on film) "and my dad" (who we see here again). With this transition in place, the next word we hear spoken is "Our," as, while we see early black and white film of people in the streets, Moore tells us where we are and begins to spell out in more detail the importance of General Motors in his life: "Our hometown of Flint, Michigan, was the birthplace of General Motors, the largest corporation in the world."

Where we are, then, is back in a moment of time when Flint was enjoying "a prosperity that working people had never seen before" and, out of a feeling of gratitude to the company, the town had thrown a birthday party, "for the people of General Motors on their fiftieth anniversary." Here we see excerpts from a film General Motors made of the celebration the town held in its honour, accompanied by Moore's voice-over telling us that this was Flint as he remembers it, "where every day was a great

day." In other words, he remembers it through rose-coloured glasses. But the memory of the parade celebrating GM's 50th anniversary is now followed by a very different kind of memory.

As we reach the film's three-minute mark, we see first a photograph of Moore's extended family (parents, grandparents, etc.), then a photograph of his uncle, then old film of the strikers and the National Guard, and all the while we are hearing this:

My dad worked on the assembly line at GM's AC Spark Plug in Flint for thirty-three years. In fact, as I grew older, I discovered my entire family had worked for GM: Grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. Everyone but me. My uncle Laverne was in the Great Flint Sit-Down strike. Just before the year's end in 1936 he and thousands of other GM workers took over the Flint factories and barricaded themselves inside, refusing to budge for forty-four days. The national guard was called in, and the eyes of the world were on Flint. On February 11, 1937, General Motors gave in and the UAW was born.

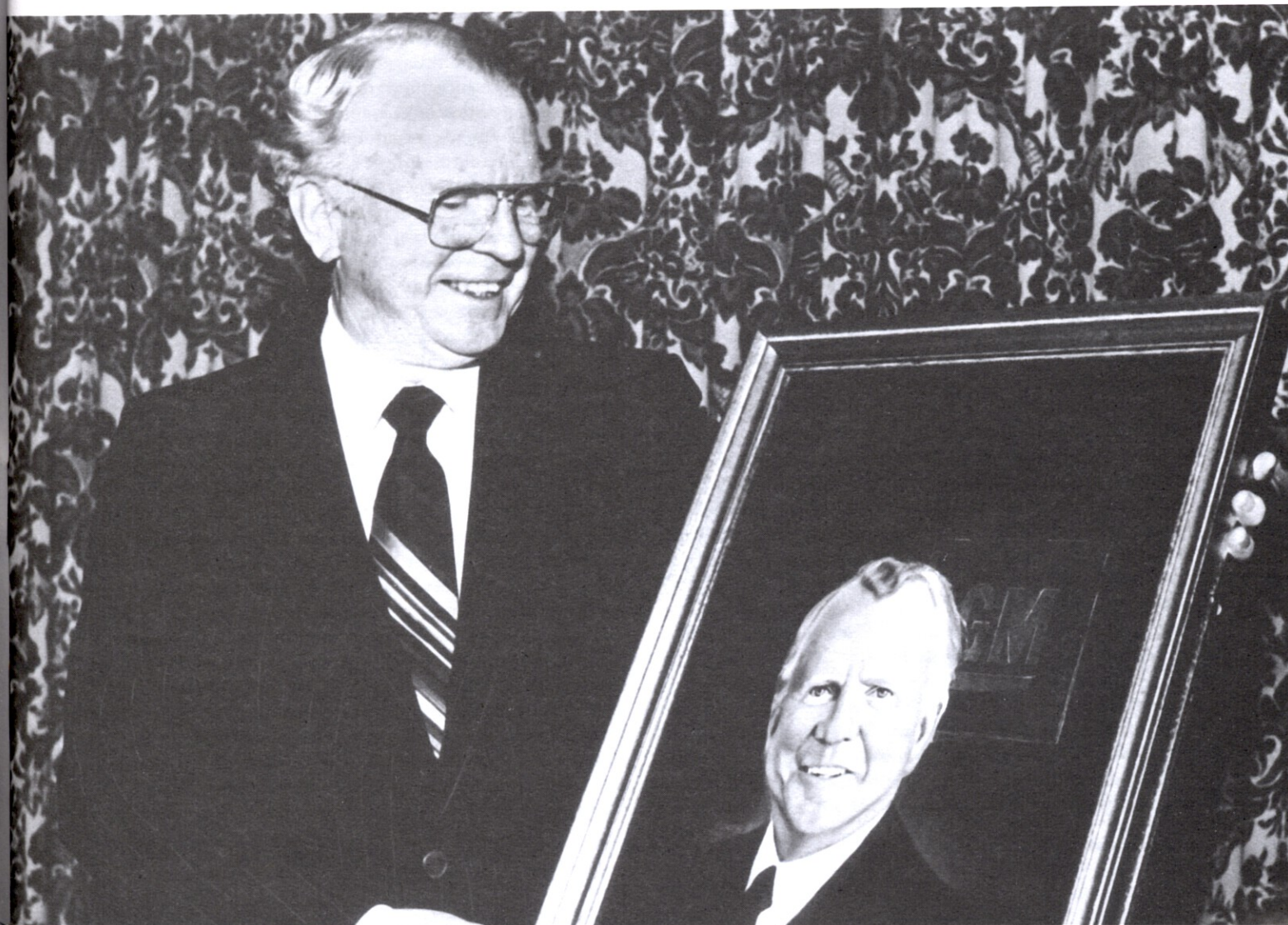
As he makes clear a few minutes later when he declares his mission, Moore thinks of this truly radical political act as an achievement to be proud of, to celebrate, and to retain as a model worth trying to live up to (if not necessarily directly imitate). But in the opening of *Roger and Me*, instead of dwelling on

this incident, Moore quickly moves on with his personal narrative, explaining that the assembly line wasn't for him and that his "heroes were the Flint people who'd escaped the life in the factory and got out of Flint," people like "Flint's most famous native son, Bob Eubanks, host of TV's hit show *The Newlywed Game*." For a moment, at least, Moore would have us believe that Eubanks (who later in the film reveals himself to be a real sleaze-bag) was his model as, after ten years of editing his own paper in Flint, he left to work on a "muckraking magazine in San Francisco."

But it soon turns out that the glamour of San Francisco was not for him, and for an interesting reason. Jokingly filming a straight-faced barista towering above him as she recites a list of coffee options, while claiming that "trying to get a simple cup of coffee in San Francisco" had become "a nightmare" for him, Moore portrays the dilemma he found himself in as follows:

I went to work and announced that I was going to give a monthly column to a Flint auto worker. The owner [of the magazine] instead told me to run an investigative report on herbal teas. I told him I had a better idea. Let's put the auto worker on the cover. The owner wasn't amused and declared that California and I were a mismatch ...

Of course, the conclusion we as viewers are being encouraged to



reach is that the real mismatch is between two conceptions of radicalism: the middle-class one Moore lampoons with that reference to herbal teas and the working-class one he champions.

Still only just over five minutes into the film, Moore brings his personal narrative to an end with his return to Flint, just "a few days" before "the bad news hit." We hear the latter as it is delivered first by Dan Rather in an excerpt from CBS Evening News ("Good evening. General Motors confirmed it today. It is going to close plants employing almost 30,000 workers") and then by GM chairman Roger Smith ("Today we are announcing the closing of eleven of our older plants"). At this point, though Moore never raises his voice, his commentary starts to become increasingly sarcastic ("So this was GM chairman Roger Smith. He appeared to have a brilliant plan. First close eleven factories in the US, then open eleven in Mexico, where you pay the workers seventy cents an hour ... Roger Smith was a true genius"). Film of Roger Smith announcing the bad news is then succeeded by a brief sequence in which we see the last truck going down the line (Moore and his friends having posed "as a TV crew from Toledo" in order to get inside the factory and film it), which is in turn followed by groups of workers telling Moore what they think of Roger Smith. Not surprisingly, they think that *he* is the one who should be fired. But not everyone in Flint is of this opinion. Tom Kay, for example, the "spokesman and lobbyist for GM" whom we hear from next, is "sure that Roger Smith has a social conscience as strong as anyone else in the country." Prompted by Moore ("Have you ever talked to Roger Smith?" – "Sure." – "What kind of man do you find him to be?"), Kay says that he finds Smith "a very warm man." And it is in response to this, around the ten minute mark, that Moore (feigning doubt: "A warm man? Did I have Roger Smith judged all wrong?") declares his mission, which is to try to do something on behalf of the newly unemployed workers ("My mission was a simple one: to convince Roger Smith to spend a day with me in Flint and meet some of the people who were losing their jobs").

In its skillful blending of the personal and the political, its obvious anger over the workers being thrown out of their jobs, and its infectious love of festivity (of private parties and public parades), which seems irrepressible, and which, far from making us forget the anger, somehow manages to accompany and focus it, in its revelation of a form of activism that is simultaneously serious and gay, Moore's *Roger and Me* has an impressive beginning. In retrospect, these qualities also make it seem like a typical Moore opening. What makes it distinctive is the fact that what we are being offered here is a self-portrait, which is striking on a number of counts: (i) because, in so far as the portrait in question is that of an artist, it is an exceptionally disarming one; and (ii) because of the degree to which this artist-in-the-making defines himself communally, in terms of place and politics, and in terms of his "mission."

Who's to blame? Moore's mission

I was raised in an Irish Catholic home, in Flint, Michigan, by working-class parents, and the lesson that they and the good sisters taught me while I was growing up resonates with me to this day. "We will be judged by how we treat the least among us. That a rich man will have a

more difficult time getting into heaven than a camel will have getting through a needle." I mean, those were the lessons we were taught.

—Moore (on "Charlie Rose Show")²

In her review of *Roger and Me*, Pauline Kael made it plain that she was not impressed by the "mock mission" (Moore "set[ting] out, with a camera crew, ostensibly to persuade Roger Smith to come to Flint and see the human results of his policies") that she identifies as "the peg that Moore hangs the picture on."³ I myself find that the scenes in which we see Moore trying and (up until near the end) failing to gain access to Roger Smith (his being told that he can't take the elevator to the fourteenth floor, or that Smith isn't actually in the private club where Moore had been told he could find him) are not just frustrating and predictable (which on one level they are obviously meant to be) but also unilluminating and frankly (especially on a second viewing) irritating. But at the same time, it seems to me that Moore's subsequent work reveals that he is absolutely serious about his mission.

At one point in *Roger and Me*, Moore asks Pat Boone "Who's to blame for what happened in Flint?" "I don't," replies Boone, "think it's anybody's fault." This is of course a standard answer, which Boone then elaborates on in the usual way: "In a free society, in a capitalist, democratic society, things do change. There are shifts and trends. I'm sure General Motors doesn't have any desire to either close down a plant or put anyone out of work." Within its own terms of reference, Boone's answer may not seem entirely unreasonable. But for Moore, this is not good enough. If one thing about his films seems undeniable, it is the extent to which they are the product of his tireless drive to uphold the notion of accountability, of responsibility. Or to put it another way, the extent to which they are the product of his desire to uphold a sense of ethics.

We see this at work in all kinds of ways, including, for example, the moment when Moore ended the speech with which he accepted an Academy Award for *Bowling for Columbine* with the words, "Mr Bush we are against this war. Shame on you, shame on you Mr Bush."⁴ Many of us felt relief and approval at that moment. In some circumstances, a sense of shame seems entirely appropriate, and shamelessness something to be deplored. Yet some of the attempts Moore makes to get others to acknowledge their share of responsibility for certain wrongdoings can (and perhaps ought to) make us uncomfortable. I'm thinking here not so much of his handing out "DownSizer of the Year" awards to nonplussed but usually polite representatives of various corporations in *The Big One* but more of his meetings with Phil Knights at the end of *The Big One* and Charlton Heston near the end of *Bowling for Columbine*.

I would think that one natural reaction to these scenes is to feel ill-at-ease. This doesn't mean that I wish they weren't there. But however much we may disapprove of the gun-happy position we see Heston taking throughout the film, he is an elderly man who doesn't look at all well and, on one level, Moore is clearly abusing Heston's hospitality. As for Phil Knight, while he is a younger, fitter man who seems better able to take care of himself, and while he is the one who has asked Moore to visit and so oughtn't to be surprised when the latter tries to persuade him to do what he has no intention of doing – even so, the moments when Moore puts him on the spot and we see him

almost squirming are, I imagine, not likely to be easy ones for most members of the audience. So there is a real possibility that these endings could backfire and produce unexpected sympathy for Moore's targets. At one point in *The Corporation*, Noam Chomsky reflects on the significance of the fact that representatives of corporations or causes we consider harmful may sometimes be nice and charming when we meet them as individuals.⁵ So perhaps it's simply a mistake to personalize the issues in this way? Possibly. I'm not sure. Is there an obviously better way of securing our attention and then getting us to think about our responsibilities?

Though I can see how some might want to read Moore's visit to Charlton Heston's house (and especially Moore's leaving behind a photograph of a murdered six-year-old) as a case of succumbing to the temptation of self-righteousness, satisfying a need to assign blame *somewhere*, to be able to hold someone *wholly* responsible, my own view is that it is best understood as part of the process in which he can be seen to be working his way towards a deeper, more complex sense of responsibility, broadening his sense of mission as he goes along. But I'll come back to this question. What I now want to do is look more closely at Pauline Kael's objections to *Roger and Me*, and to consider them in the light of some (in this context) highly suggestive remarks Philip Roth made back in 1961.

More of Kael's review, plus Roth's reflections on the descent into unreality

Kael's deepest objection to *Roger and Me* is that she feels it manipulates her into responding in a way she subsequently wishes she hadn't done. I find this particularly interesting because what for me always makes Kael worth reading is the directness with which she records her responses. Her directness makes it easier for us as readers to figure out where we stand. Unlike, then, those who find this "muckraking documentary" to be "scathing and Voltairean," Kael tells us that she finds it "shallow and facetious, a piece of gonzo demagoguery that made [her] feel cheap for laughing":

What happens is that Moore, a big, shambling joker in windbreaker and baseball cap, narrates his analysis of the ironies and idiocies of what's going on, and deadpans his way through interviews with an assortment of unlikely people, who are used as stooges, as filler. He asks them broad questions about the high rate of unemployment and the soaring crime rate, and their responses make them look like phonies or dupes ... elderly ladies on a golf course are confused as to what's wanted of them; visiting entertainers are cheery and optimistic; Miss Michigan, who is about to take part in the Miss America Pageant, tries to look concerned and smiles her prettiest. What does Moore expect? Why are these people being made targets for the audience's laughter?

It isn't difficult to see why Kael feels that the "assortment of unlikely people" we encounter in *Roger and Me* "are used as stooges, as filler," and her comments on the "elderly ladies on a golf course" (that they "are confused as to what's wanted of them"), and on Miss Michigan (that she "tries to look concerned and smiles her prettiest"), strike me as being accurate.

But the really interesting questions are first the one Kael then poses: "What does Moore expect?" And then the two further questions it prompts: What does Kael expect? And: What do we expect? Kael's expectation is clear: she expects and assumes that "these people [are] being made targets for the audience's laughter." For my part, I think I half-expected this too but I don't think it works out this way.

What about Moore? What did he expect? Kael's assumption is that she *knows* what he expected. But perhaps she's wrong. Then again, maybe not; or not entirely. Perhaps, beforehand, he *did* think of Miss Michigan and the lady golfers as likely "targets." Who knows? That may indeed be why he chose to interview them. But if so, then it looks to me as if somewhere along the way he must have changed his mind. And the result is that what gets conveyed is a sense of Moore being unsure how to react and of his communicating this uncertainty to us (or to those of us who are able or willing to revise our expectations).

In order to begin to grasp the enormous implications of what I take to be at stake here, I think we need to turn aside for a moment to recall something the novelist Philip Roth had to say about American society and the nature of contemporary reality back in 1961:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is always outdoing our talents ... Several months back, most of the country heard one of the candidates for the Presidency of the United States say something like, "Now if you feel that Senator Kennedy is right, then I sincerely believe you should vote for Senator Kennedy, and if you feel that I am right, I humbly submit that you vote for me. Now I feel, and this is certainly a personal opinion, that I am right ..." and so on. Though it did not appear this way to some thirty-four million voters, it still seems to me a little easy to ridicule Mr. Nixon, and it is not for that reason that I have bothered to paraphrase his words here. If one was at first amused by him, one was ultimately astonished ... Whatever else the television debates produced in me ..., they also produced professional envy. All the machinations over make-up and rebuttal time, all the business over whether Mr. Nixon should look at Mr. Kennedy when he replied, or should look away - all of it was so beside the point, so fantastic, so weird and astonishing, that I found myself beginning to wish I had invented it. But then, of course, one need not have been a fiction writer to wish that someone had invented it, and that it was not real and with us.

The daily newspapers, then, fill us with wonder and awe (is it possible? Is it happening?), also with sickness and despair.⁶

Pondering Moore's work (especially but not just his two most recent films) in the light of the above can help us to realise that one potentially huge advantage the documentary filmmaker has over the novelist is that he or she can make use of actually existing footage of characters like Mr. Nixon and of events every bit as "fantastic ... weird and astonishing" as the

Presidential debate Roth mentions. So that, on the one hand, Roth's reflections may help us understand the possibility that we may now be living in an historical moment when the documentary is arguably emerging as – for us, right now – the most dynamic and currently necessary of art forms.

On the other hand, the other reason Roth's reflections (on the increasingly unreal-seeming world he saw around him at the beginning of the 1960s) seem relevant here is because of the way they raise the question as to how we are supposed to react to these things. How does one react to a reality that seems to have become unreal, that seems (in the words of the French situationist, Guy Debord) to take the form of a Spectacle, or (as any number of thinkers maintained in the 1960s) that seems insane? As R.D.Laing put it back in 1964:

In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal.⁷

And again, to the extent that this is the case, the problem it creates is one of no longer being so sure as to what, in any particular circumstance, the appropriate reaction might be. How to react when one's first impulse is to want to ridicule, or to be scathing, but when both of these reactions threaten to "understand" the phenomena in question too quickly? What to do, in other words, when such reactions risk sealing us off from the possibility of encountering the new and unexpected, thereby perpetuating forms of misunderstanding? And how might such uncertainty affect the possibility of our arriving at, or pursuing, true judgement?

As Pauline Kael admits, her review of *Roger and Me* is partly written in reaction to the claim that this film is "scathing and Voltairean." This seems to have misled her into thinking that Moore "comes on in a give-'em-hell style," which he surely doesn't, but her thinking that he does then allows her to claim that "he breaks faith with the audience" by encouraging them to "laugh at ordinary working people." She sees him as coming on like a fierce satirist and then offering us "an aw-shucks, cracker-barrel pastiche" and revealing himself to be "a big, shambling joker in windbreaker and baseball cap."

There is no denying that Moore-the-"joker" exists; Kael didn't invent him. But the suggestion I now want to make is that this side of Moore may perhaps be best understood as his (actually, not unsubtle) way of responding to (maintaining a certain openness and flexibility in relation to) the kind of phenomena we have just seen Philip Roth noting back in 1961: those manifestations of contemporary life that seem both absurdly unreal and also, often, too easy to make fun of, to ridicule, or to satirize. This may help explain the tone in which he delivers his voice-over narrations and commentaries, which are invariably both deadpan and ironic, in one or another of the many different forms irony can take. Different forms of sarcasm, for example, are among these forms and Moore's tone is often sarcastic, in a way that recalls something Roland Barthes had to say near the end of the 1950s: "What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth."⁸ But again, whether or not it is sarcastic, Moore's irony often seems non-judgemental, is seldom cheap, sometimes gives way to bemusement, pure and simple, and usually inclines to the light rather than to the heavy end of the

scale. It seems to me that one can recognize all of this without missing the fact that at times his irony nevertheless manages, where appropriate, to be savage and, yes, scathing (there is, always, after all, much to be angry about).

By way of beginning to test out some of these ideas, I now want to look first at another sequence from *Roger and Me* and then at the opening of *Bowling for Columbine*.

"Cheer up, America": Pat Boone (on optimistic, can-do kinds of guys), Anita Bryant (on Margaret Thatcher), and the Amway consultant (trying to earn a living)

At one point in her review of *Roger and Me*, Kael notes that "visiting entertainers are cheery and optimistic." What we now need to see is that, while this is not exactly untrue, it is certainly misleading, because it is so extremely understated. Let's look at the sequence that brings together Anita Bryant and Pat Boone. It is preceded by one of Moore's attempts to get to see Roger, which ends with his admitting that he "wasn't having much success bringing Roger to Flint." This allows him to move into the next section, which he does by announcing that "the mayor ... was having better luck with an even higher authority. He paid TV evangelist Robert Schuller \$20,000 to come to Flint and rid the city of its unemployment plague." We then see and hear Schuller delivering "his message of hope" to a large audience at the city's hockey arena (we see a sign saying that unemployed are allowed in free):

You won't pull your way from poverty to prosperity until you realize you have to be humble enough to say, "I need help." Then what happens is you can turn your hurt into a halo ... Just because you've got problems is no excuse to be unhappy.

Shots of Schuller delivering this nonsense are intercut with glimpses of the town, and we see, accompanied by an angelic singing voice on the soundtrack, a picture of Jesus beside a church, a crucifix, a roadside sign ("Buy American or Apply for Japanese Welfare") and some graffiti ("Assholes drive Imports") on the side of a bridge. Moore's only verbal comment, however, is a no doubt (even though you can hardly tell from the voice alone) ironical "Maybe Reverend Schuller was right. Things could be worse, and there was much to be thankful for, like the Star Theatre of Flint, funded with GM money to provide entertainment and escape during Flint's hard times." And then, after we hear from an enthusiastic representative of the theatre, we see Anita Bryant singing on stage – "put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee" – as Moore's voice-over informs us that "Long before she sold orange juice, Anita Bryant sold spark plugs for General Motors' AC division ... Now she was back in Flint offering advice to the unemployed." Moore then intercuts footage of Anita on stage with footage of her on the street responding to his questions, and this is what she has to say:

[On Street:] Opportunities are still in Flint, Michigan. They're still in America. Hang in there. Take a day at a time. [On Stage:] Go forward and be positive about life ... [On street:] Today's a new day. It's an opportunity for you to look about you, and look at the positive within

yourself and within your community. I read something interesting Margaret Thatcher says: "Cheer up, America. You live in a great country. You're a free country. You have a great President. Not everything's perfect, but cheer up, because you live in a free America" ... So, we live in a free society ... Go out and do something with your hands. I don't know.

Again, Moore makes no comment on this but cuts from it directly to old film of Pat Boone singing in praise of Chevrolet and America ("the greatest land of all"). On stage in the present, Boone is singing "Speedy Gonzales" and Moore is telling us that "now 'Mr Chevrolet himself' had 'arrived in Flint just when we needed him.'" After an obviously very happy Boone has recalled with evident satisfaction his Chevrolet Corvette, Moore asks him if he has ever met Roger Smith and Boone says that, while he hasn't met him, he gathers that Smith "seems a very optimistic, can-do kind of guy." His parting words assure Moore that he (Boone) is "sure General Motors doesn't have any desire to either close a plant or put people out of work." According to him, the key is to be found in "attitude":

Folks wind up saying, "It was the best thing that happened to me when my job at the plant phased out. I was only gonna go so far at the plant. Now I've got my own business, whatever it is." It may be no accident that the Amway business, for one, is in ... Michigan offering anybody, for very little money, a chance to start earning dollars, having their own store in their home.

Part of my point is that if a novelist had invented characters saying these things, we might conclude that we were getting parody rather than realism. But their inanities add up to an ideology, an "attitude," that is very common in the US, and while Boone and Bryant are thriving on it, others are not so fortunate.

Moore immediately goes on to remind us of this by cutting from Boone's last words to Janet, a spokeswoman for Amway, who assures us that "If you have a dream, and you go after your dream, you can do it." As Kael sees it, the camera here "makes brutal fun" of Janet but I disagree. Moore introduces her with these words:

Janet was one of hundreds of Flint's citizens who had taken Pat's advice. Although her husband was still working at GM, she'd seen many of her friends laid off, and didn't want to take any chances. She'd been the founder and host of Flint's feminist radio show. Now she was a distributor for Amway.

In this, I hear respect mixed with sympathy and concern. As a result, when I hear her enthusiastically explaining what is involved in color consulting (helping people to see their "seasons," and what colour clothes suit them best) I find my impulse to laugh (colour consulting seems so strange) muffled somewhat by the emergence of another impulse: curiosity. When we then learn that three months after Moore filmed Janet's Amway meeting for us she "phoned in a panic" to confess "she'd made a terrible mistake," I don't – when I hear her explanation (the people who had colour-analyzed her had made a mistake: "I've very recently learned that I am not an

autumn ... Little did I know that I was not the season that I was telling people I was") – find myself laughing *at her*. And while it is certainly true that Moore looks very funny as we see him sitting in a chair and allowing himself to be colour-analyzed by Janet ("As it turned out," he tells us, "we were the same season"), I don't myself, not for one moment, believe that the humour is at her expense. On the contrary, in fact, I find nothing patronizing when Moore tells us that he "felt sorry for Janet. So to cheer her up, I let her do my colours."

Janet's newfound occupation may well strike some of us as a bit weird, as for that matter might the behaviour of Reverend Schuller and the attitude espoused by Pat Boone and Anita Bryant (especially given the circumstances in which they profess it).

But it seems to me that we have two distinct kinds of weirdness here, one of which seems harmless and endearingly eccentric, while the other is surely pernicious. My own sense is that Moore wants us to see that, unlike the second kind, the first – Janet's – is worth respecting. And I think it's important that, while Moore's main concern in this sequence of the film (as in others) is to make sure we realise how hollow the talk about opportunities in Flint actually is, he is nevertheless able to pause along the way to note such instances of human eccentricity as this one.

Bowling for Columbine

Moore begins by creating the impression that the film we are about to see is not his but rather the NRA's. In fact, to begin with we *are*, momentarily, watching an old NRA film as we see, in black and white, a soldier in uniform, standing to attention, and saying these words: "The National Rifle Association has produced a film which you are sure to find of great interest. Let's look at it." We then cut to colour, as (in a calm, soothing, confidence-inspiring voice) Moore's narration begins (along with the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which starts very quietly in drum taps and then becomes gradually easier to hear, though it never gets loud):

It was the morning of April 20th, 1999, and it was pretty much like any other morning in America. The farmer did his chores, the milkman made his deliveries, the president [Moore's tone doesn't waver one iota here] bombed another country whose name we couldn't pronounce.

These words are accompanied by images, first of the Washington Monument, then of a farmer and milkman at their respective jobs, and then of buildings destroyed by the President's bombs. The narration then resumes, soon culminating in the detail: "And out in a little town in Colorado, two boys went bowling at six in the morning. Yes," Moore sums up (as we now see images first of a blonde, bikini-clad "babe" brandishing a rifle in the desert, and then of the Statue of Liberty), "it was a typical day in the United States of America."

Up until this point, Moore's presence has been limited to our hearing his voice, but now, very abruptly, he becomes visible as participating actor. Having (the narrative voice informs us) "spotted an ad in the local Michigan paper that said" (and we are shown the ad in question) "if you opened an account at North Country Bank – the bank would give you a gun," Moore

enters the bank in question, goes through the necessary procedure, and acquires a shotgun. "Well," says Moore (as, with the weapon in his hand, he addresses a bank employee), "here's my first question: 'Don't you think it's a little dangerous, handing out guns in a bank?'" At which point, he strides outside, triumphantly waving his new weapon up in the air, and we begin to hear the driving beat of Teenage Fanclub's "Take the Skinheads Bowling." This immediately takes us into the credit sequence, with the credits coming up over early black-and-white footage (from the fifties?) of people bowling. So as we hear the lines "Some people say that bowling alleys got big lanes/Some people say that bowling alleys all look the same," and then the refrain – "all look the same/all look the same" – we see, in slow motion, first around a dozen people bowling in unison from the right of the screen, then some bowling (also in unison) from the left; then more bowling accompanied by the lines "Everybody's comin' home for lunch these days/Last night there were skinheads on my lawn/Take the skinheads bowling/Take them bowling."

The effect of this credits sequence is (to use an overworked but unavoidable term here) surreal, surreal and dream-like: partly because, as the clothes clearly signify, this is a scene from the past; also because of the slow-motion, the identical, uniform gestures, the song's refrain ("all look the same"), and the prospect of difference (in the form of the skinheads) being introduced into this setting. But in addition to seeming dreamily surreal, this sequence also manages to engender a sense of barely-contained excitement. Or, rather, it builds on, and deepens, the excitement already engendered by the preceding scenes. And considering that these scenes remind us of the fact not only that April 20th was the day both of the Columbine shootings but also the day when some of the bombs dropped in the Kosovo war landed on a hospital and primary school in the village of Bogutovac near Kraljevo, the distinctly upbeat mood might well seem perverse. How to explain it? Well, to begin with, it's not as if the film doesn't take these events with the appropriate degree of seriousness later on. And knowing this, it seems to me that what both explains and justifies the bubbling sense of comic exuberance we feel during the opening is that there is, after all, an exhilarating side to American freedom and we are being exposed to it first. What is exhilarating is the fact that the craziness is out in the open; no-one is hiding it. For the filmmaker who would make use of it, the incriminating evidence (the bikini-clad, shotgun-wielding woman, the ad in the paper encouraging readers to open a bank account by offering them the enticement of a free gun) is so out-in-the-open that (if you know what you're looking for) you can't miss it. It is so incredibly *easy* for Moore to film the sequence in the bank, and just as easy, soon after the opening credits, to film the sequence in which we see him entering the local barbershop with gun in hand and purchasing ammunition for it there. To anticipate the opening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it seems natural to wonder if these are not scenes out of a dream. But of course they are not, and while their implications may be scary, watching these scenes is (at least, I imagine, for most of us) fun; it feels like being on the edge (of madness); it's wild, hilarious, exciting. As Philip Roth clearly knows, American reality fills us not just with "sickness and despair" but also with "wonder and awe"; it doesn't by any means *only* stupefy, sicken and infuriate; it can also be liberating – often, no doubt, dangerously liberating, but genuinely liberating, nevertheless.

Now as I've already suggested, when we recall the grim nature of the film's ostensible subject matter (the Columbine shootings), this upbeat opening may well make some of us feel a bit uneasy. So it's important to note that what makes the opening's almost amoral-seeming gaiety so remarkable is the fact that it co-exists in Moore's work with the moral sense I commented on earlier – a moral sense that I suggest we see as a work in progress, deepening and becoming more complex as Moore broadens and refines his sense of mission.

"Accept[ing] responsibility for our collective action"

In the little speech he delivers at the end of *The Corporation*, Moore recalls how, when he discovered – while visiting Littleton, Colorado, after the Columbine shootings – first that Lockheed Martin, the builder of weapons of mass destruction, was the main employer, and then that the parents working there couldn't "see the connect between what *they* do for a living and what their kids do (or did) at school," his initial reaction was to get on his "high horse." Only afterwards did it dawn on him (and it's revealing in what follows to see how easily he slips into identification with the auto workers, whose cause he had been championing for so long) that neither he nor his wife (both children of auto workers in Flint), nor so far as he knows anyone else in Flint, had "ever stopped to think this thing we do for a living, the building of automobiles, is probably the single biggest reason why the polar ice caps are going to melt and end civilization as we know it":

There's no connect between "I'm just an assembler on an assembly line building a car which is good for people in society and moves them around" ... [and] the larger picture and the larger responsibility of what we're doing. Ultimately we have to as individuals accept responsibility for our collective action and the larger harm that it causes in our world. (My italics)⁹

It is, I believe, in the light of this hard-won declaration of mature faith that we need to read Moore's decision both to buy that shotgun at the beginning of *Bowling for Columbine* and to end the film *not* with his confrontation with Charlton Heston but rather with a shot of himself bowling. Far from being evidence of egotism, these actions should be seen as his way of implicating himself, of showing us that he realises he must assume his share of responsibility too. And it seems to me that the culminating shot (one of my favourites) of him bowling (it has to be said, impressively, with some force) also serves to underline the fact that, in his case at least, maturity does not entail any repudiation of the explosive energy we see him displaying as he hits the bull's eye, knocking all the pins down in one hit.

I would say that the efforts Moore makes to define the subject matter of *Bowling for Columbine* in relation to Flint, Michigan, should be understood as part of the same strategy – as one of the ways in which he is trying to reinforce this sense of shared responsibility. "By the time I was a teenager," he tells us early on, "I was such a good shot I won the National Rifle Association's Marksman award." Then, making sure we see the photograph of himself with the award in question, he adds, by way of explanation: "You see, I grew up in Michigan, a gun-lover's paradise. And so" (as we see film of Charlton Heston) "did this man ... We

come from a state where everyone loves to go hunting."

The next connection is when we are told that "not far from where Charlton Heston and [Moore] grew up is a training ground for the Michigan militia." And the latter "became known around the world when, on April 19th, 1995, two guys living in Michigan who had attended the Militia meetings, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people." This provides Moore with another strand (that of the Oklahoma bombing) to weave into a fabric that we might have otherwise thought was going to focus exclusively on the Columbine shootings. When, after interviewing some members of the militia, he next visits James Nichols, it is still the Oklahoma connection he is exploring. And again, his justification for the visit is that James Nichols (the brother of Terry, one of the two convicted bombers) is almost a neighbour. "James graduated from high school the same year I did, in the district next to mine. On this farm in Decker, Michigan, McVeigh and the Nichols brothers made practice bombs before Oklahoma City." Finally (in this particular sequence), Moore visits Oscoda, Michigan, which is "across the bay from the Nichols farm." He visits Oscoda because "Eric Harris, who would later go on to commit the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, spent part of his childhood [there]. Eric lived on the air-force base in Oscoda, where his dad flew planes during the Gulf War." In Oscoda, in a pool room with video games in the background, Moore meets Brent and his buddy DJ, and learns that the latter went to school with Eric Harris. It turns out that Brent got expelled from school for pulling a gun on a kid. "Could've been a lot worse," he tells Moore. "Could've been Eric Harris," Moore suggests. "It could've been," Brent allows. And as for DJ, he says his "name was second on the bomb list" and admits, after some prompting, that he built a bomb using home-made napalm. Sounds as if in his case too, it could have been Eric Harris.

It is also important to note here the extent to which Moore's method, in all four of his documentaries, might be said to be Socratic, in the sense that it is often the people he is engaging in dialogue who raise the issues he wants to explore. It is, for example, one of the Militia members who claims, near the beginning of *Bowling for Columbine*, that owning guns is "an American tradition. It's an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible ... It's your job to defend you and yours. If you don't do it, you're in dereliction of duty, as an American. Period." This is also the view of a female Militia member, who tells Moore, "We have a desire to fulfil our responsibilities and duties as Americans, and armed citizenry is part of that." These claims raise fundamental questions, questions that reveal the extraordinary scope of Moore's ambition, which I now want to look at in a bit more detail.

Examining "the American psyche": the extent of Moore's political and artistic ambition

This ultimately is not just a film about guns. It ultimately isn't a film about gun control. This is a film about the American psyche and the American ethic, such as it is. That's what I'm hoping to get to, in the exploration of these subjects. And guns are just ... my entry point into the much larger discussion that I wish would take place ... I'm much more concerned about the fact that we've

gone nuts, as opposed to whether we've got too many gun nuts in America.¹⁰

– Moore (on *Bowling for Columbine*)

As I have come to see it, Moore is wonderfully ambitious in two ways: politically and artistically, or (since I don't intend – and I don't believe he intends – to give either of them precedence or priority over the other) artistically and politically. As a result, it isn't really possible to talk for long about the one without simultaneously saying something about the other.

This should now become evident as I turn to briefly consider the sense in which it can be said that he is politically ambitious. I'm thinking of a moment in the 1961 essay by Philip Roth that I cited earlier. "Recently," Roth says, "in *Commentary*, Benjamin DeMott wrote that the 'deeply lodged suspicion of the times [is] ... that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere' (Roth 121). I'm also thinking of the last words spoken in *The Corporation*: "I'm convinced that a few people are going to leave the movie theatre or get up off the couch and go and do something, anything, to get the world back in our hands" (My italics). As it happens, these last words in *The Corporation* are spoken by Moore.

Ironically, DeMott's pronouncement was followed by the most politically active decade since the Thirties. But that aside, my point is that since then, for much of the last three and a half decades, there has been – at least among those of us who have been deeply unhappy with the kind of status quo that was restored in Western countries at the end of the Sixties – a widespread feeling of powerlessness, a feeling that is accurately summarized in DeMott's words. And in the face of this, from 1989's *Roger and Me* onwards, Moore has done a lot to help spread the feeling that doing something "to get the world back in our hands" may indeed still be an option.

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the extent to which the "something" Moore hopes to stimulate people to do involves some pretty tough and extremely wide-ranging questioning. In fact, what his films put into question is nothing less than the all-embracing "system" in which he and his fellow Americans live. Thus, at the end of *Roger and Me*, Tom Kay, the spokesman for GM, says this:

If you're espousing a philosophy, which apparently you are, that the corporation owes employees cradle-to-the-grave security, I don't think that can be accomplished under a free enterprise system.

But this is only one of a number of references in Moore's work to the "system." Almost half an hour into *The Big One*, we see Moore relating to an audience an exchange he had with a businessman he found himself sitting next to on a plane trip. "What," the businessman asked him, "have you got against profit? Company's got a responsibility to its shareholders. That's our system. The shareholders." Moore disagreed:

That's not our system. Our system's a democracy. I've read the American Constitution. The word "shareholder" does not appear once in that document. I've seen the word "people," "of, for, and by the people." But I've not seen the word "shareholder."

Though Moore never (at least in his films) espouses the philosophy Tom Kay attributes to him (condensed into the proposition that “the corporation owes employees cradle-to-the-grave security”), his films do strongly *imply* that, insofar as the Free Enterprise system is geared to the interests of shareholders at the expense of the people-at-large, it is a betrayal of American democracy and so needs to be substantially changed. But it would seem that a clear majority of American citizens sees the Free Enterprise system (or Capitalism) quite simply as the American Way, which means (given his critique of it) that, in the eyes of many, Moore is inevitably seen as a being anti-American. There is, furthermore, a sense in which this charge is not wrong and, however obvious the point may seem to some, it is perhaps worth quickly listing some of the things one has in mind when maintaining that his films clearly *are* anti- the version of the US that has for a long time now been (and currently still very much is) in the ascendancy. Recall, for example, the mocking endings of *Roger and Me* (a shot of Anita Bryant advising the unemployed of Flint that “If you decide to go for it, you’ll make it,” while Pat Boone’s voice can be heard singing “I am proud to be an American, part of a great democracy” etc.) and of *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore ironically declaring this to be “a glorious time to be an American,” while Joey Ramone sings his version of “What a Wonderful World”). Yet at the same time, it is possible to argue (as John Berger does of *Fahrenheit 9/11*) that there is a sense in which Moore’s films are the work of a patriotic American. In fact, I’m quite sure that this is the case. But what this therefore means is that he stands for the possibility of a radically different kind of American society to the one his films examine and put into question, even (I think it’s imperative to add) if many of the seeds of the former (the energy, the humour, the decency and generosity of ordinary Americans) can be detected in the latter.

In short, what I take to be admirable about Moore’s political ambition is the way in which he has stepped outside the “framework of fixed and unquestionable presuppositions” which Noam Chomsky claims limits debate in the US.¹¹ This means that he makes heavy demands on his audience, expecting them not only to ponder extremely unsettling questions but also to contemplate disturbing possible answers, one of which comes in response to the question as to whether or not all the emphasis on the need for Americans to protect themselves (with guns, in specially designed shelters, etc.) doesn’t imply that, on some level, even if they don’t *look* particularly fearful, Americans are afraid of something? In the statement Moore made while at the Toronto Film Festival for the screening of *Bowling for Columbine*, we find him saying this:

I believe that if we were able to get rid of all the guns in America and have stronger gun laws then we would still have the central problem ..., of being afraid of the other, and being manipulated so easily by politicians, by corporations, by the media ... (My italics)

Moore is not the only person to conclude that his fellow countrymen and women live in fear.¹² Here, for example, in the opening chapter of his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, is D.H.Lawrence on the subject (back in the 1920s):

This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that dis-

pleases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that’s my freedom. Free? Why I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow-countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them.

One reason it seems to me appropriate to recall this here is that, like Lawrence (in his *Studies*), Moore too traces the fear he finds around him all the way back to the Pilgrim Fathers. He does this in an astonishingly provocative cartoon that he wrote himself and that offers “A Brief History of America”; it appears around fifty minutes into the film. I suppose it might be said that here Moore is lecturing us, albeit in a much more entertaining form than the usual lecture format allows. But here again, we find the argument he is advancing being made for him, in a variety of ways, by others. By Matt Stone, for example, who remembers going to highschool in Littleton years earlier and how “they scare you into conformism and doing good in school by saying: ‘If you’re a loser now, you’re gonna be a loser forever.’” Or, at the very end, just after Moore has emerged from Heston’s home, by the mere presence (however unrepresentative he may seem to be on the surface) of the young man in the gun shop wearing a cap that says “Fuck Everybody” on it. “In your mind,” says Moore, “you imagine somebody who might break into your house, to harm you or your family. What does that person look like?” “You,” responds the young man. “Her. Him. The camera guy, anybody. Could be a gun in the camera, I don’t know.”

In summary, then, what Moore’s films offer is the spectacle of the US undergoing a penetrating self-examination, which often takes the form of a fairly devastating self-critique – the kind, I would add, that those of us who are non-Americans might do well to emulate. And as I indicated earlier, to say this – that Moore wants to make the kind of films that can raise fundamental questions; to do this for the widest possible audience; and in as non-patronizing a way as possible, one that won’t end up by making these questions seem less challenging than they are, or by blunting their edge – is clearly to go a long way towards saying what needs to be said concerning Moore’s *artistic* (as well as his political) ambition. Which is just as well since at this point I clearly don’t have the room to say much more about it. In fact, in the circumstances, I will restrict myself to just a few remarks on *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Though there can be no question of my attempting, in the space remaining here, an exhaustive analysis of this film, I do want to make it clear why I think so highly of it.

Fahrenheit 9/11

We worked hard on creating a work of cinema that would move people not just politically but on an emotional and visceral level. I hope we have made a contribution to this art form we love so much.

—Moore (Introduction to *Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader*, xv)

The film’s opening

The first image is of one of America’s favourite ways to celebrate: a fireworks display. We first see and hear the sound of fireworks against a dark and otherwise silent background before

cutting to a shot of Al Gore and his supporters celebrating his Florida victory and (in the film's opening words) Moore's voice-over asking "Was it all just a dream?" If *Bowling* ended with Moore leaving "the Heston estate" and reentering what he calls "the real world," our first glimpse of which (from slow motion footage of people fleeing in the subway, taken I imagine from some disaster movie) makes it look more like a nightmare, *Fahrenheit* begins by making clear what Moore and many others believe "really happened" on election night 2000: the election was stolen. Instead of explicitly stating this in his film, in the opening minutes, Moore shifts (in the first transition) from the dream-like atmosphere of Al Gore's victory celebration (accompanied by somewhat muted, jolly, banjo music in the background) to some of the connections that suggest this is what happened. Then, around the three-minute mark, the banjo stops, the screen fades to black, and we get the second transition, this time to footage of Al Gore presiding over a Joint Session of Congress and being obliged to publically deny the attempts made by various Black Congressmen and women to recognize him as their legitimate President. Our feelings during this scene are surely mixed: on the one hand, it is heartening to see these brave men and women standing up for what they believe; on the other, it is sad to reflect on how they have been let down; and maddening to see how they are surrounded by politicians themselves unwilling to risk stepping outside the framework of legality that protects them. I would think that in many of us this mixture is likely to produce, in reaction, a lump in the throat. The scene takes us up to the five-minute mark, at which point we get another abrupt change of mood as the screen dissolves to TV coverage of a rainy Inauguration Day.

Now, for many of us, the mood becomes one of first relief and then positive elation because we see that there are crowds protesting, calling out "Hail to the thief," and pelting Bush's limousine with eggs. This brings the Inauguration parade to a halt and Bush's limousine is then forced to accelerate as we see security guards running to keep up. As the voice-over tells us, "Bush's limo hit the gas to prevent an even larger riot. No President had ever witnessed such a thing on his Inauguration Day." It looks for a few moments like one of those movies in which a President is under threat, but it is real footage. For a short while, then, the mood remains triumphant before it shifts again, as we move this time into an upbeat, breezy sequence in which the President seems to be spending an excessive amount of time on vacation and is frankly made (admittedly, though, with his active cooperation) to look ridiculous. This takes us up to the ten-minute mark, at which point we get the second fade to black and the credit sequence begins. To the accompaniment of deliciously quiet, tinkling music, and to our great delight, we see, during the credits, Bush and some of his cabinet members getting their faces made up before they appear before the camera. (The fact that, as we of course know very well, everyone who appears on TV has to go through a similar process in no way diminishes our keen enjoyment. After all, a good deal of the power these people exert has to do with their success in manipulating image and spectacle.)

Finally, at the end of the credits (around twelve minutes in) the screen goes black again, but this time it stays black for just over a minute as we hear planes hitting towers and the sounds of distress and great confusion on the streets. When we begin to see the people on the street, we can't hear the actual sounds

they are making; for a while, all we can hear is a bell tolling, followed a few moments later by the sound of violins. Only at this point do we very briefly hear some voices ("Save their souls, Lord") before silence again descends and, in slow motion, we see people running away from the falling debris.

I submit that what we have in this opening sequence is an artist at the height of his powers. The pacing is superb and the mood changes are masterly, as we (we non-Bush supporters) move from disappointment through anger and then sadness to exultation and then anger again, and then to feelings of awe as we find ourselves again taking in the bottomless grief on the faces of passers-by, the human effects of the attack on the Trade Center. It seems to me that there is absolutely nothing inappropriate in noting that all of this is transmitted to us through art. Moore's touch is so respectful (where respect is due) and so splendidly irreverent (where irreverence is due); the aesthetic effects he achieves (the use of sound, of silence, of slow motion) are entirely in the service of what seems humanly and morally most important. It is an astonishingly accomplished performance. And here, as elsewhere in Moore's work, a by no means negligible part of what astonishes us (and feels liberating) is the realisation that so much material is out there and available¹³; and that Moore is one artist who knows how (cinematically) to make use of it to maximum effect.

I now want to offer some thoughts on the kind of audience I think the film is appealing to.

How should we understand the "our" in "get[ting] the world back in[to] our hands"?

Though it is *Fahrenheit 9/11* I have in mind, I want to take my first example of someone I think "our hands" now includes from outside of Moore's work: Wilton Sekzer is a retired NYPD sergeant, who tells his story in Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005). Sekzer fought in Vietnam. At twenty-one-years of age he was a door gunner in an army helicopter. "I grew up," he explains, "knowing that should the situation arise, you were expected to answer the call when the country made the call":

There was no such thing as 'Well, I wonder if my country is right. Is anybody lying to me about this?' You don't grow up thinking that. You grow up saying 'If the bugle calls, you go.'

When Sekzer subsequently learned that his "country" had lied to him and his fellow citizens (that the reason President Lyndon Johnson gave for declaring war – his claim that US ships were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin – was false), it seems that his reaction was one of sad resignation ("There was no need to lie"). In itself, it did not succeed in shaking his sense of patriotism. So after he lost his son in the Trade Center on 9/11, he believed President Bush when the latter went before Congress and identified the enemy as Saddam Hussein, who he maintained was "harboring terrorists, including members of Al-Qaeda." An enthusiastic supporter of the war, Sekzer even went so far as to request that his son's name be put on one of the guided bombs to be dropped on Iraq. And his request was granted. But Sekzer has a change of heart when he later hears his President pressured into admitting that "we've had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved in September 11th." Sekzer's reaction to this news is worth giving in some detail:

What is he? Nuts or what? What the hell did we go in there for? ... I was mad ... My first thought was "You're a liar." I'm from the old school. Certain people walk on water, the President of the United States is one of them. If I can't trust the President of the United States ... [there is a particularly significant pause here] ... I don't know. It's a terrible thing when American citizens can't trust the President. You begin to wonder, what the hell's with the whole system. There's something wrong with the entire system.

I should note that the above speech is full of thoughtful pauses as we see Sekzer leaving his apartment and getting on the subway train for New York, the one he was on when he first saw the Trade Center in flame, and also that the speech culminates in an obviously painful self-examination. Sekzer feels that some will call him a war-monger for arranging to have his son's name put on the bomb, but he says that he's not sorry because he "acted under the conditions at that time." He then asks himself "Was it wrong?" and quickly answers, "It was wrong but I didn't know that." And finally, he asks the question "Is it regrettable?" – his only answer to this being a deep sigh.

On the one hand, then, I would say that Moore is trying in his work to reach such "ordinary" people as Wilton Sekzer – people whose willingness and ability, when challenged, to question the deeply held beliefs on which their sense of reality is founded makes them *extraordinary*. Think, for another example, in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, of the role played by Lila Lipscomb, who we first see at work in her job of executive assistant in Career Alliance, Flint. Lila is someone who, in the past, has advised her children that the military is a good option since she "can't afford to have [them] go to college." We next see her outside her home, putting the flag up in the morning, something she started doing when her daughter was in Desert Storm, and has been doing every single day since. In response to Moore's questioning, she confesses that she "always hated the protesters" ("It was just, like, they were dishonoring my son" [a soldier in Iraq]), right up until she "came to understand that they weren't protesting the men and women that were there, they were protesting the concept of the war." Then a bit later on, we see her surrounded by her family, in a very emotional scene in which she recalls the moment when she learned that her first-born son died in action. Choking back tears, the anguished Lila reads from a letter she had received from her son in which he had expressed his anger against the President ("He got us out here for nothing whatsoever. I am so furious right now, Mama"). And as Lila's husband, Howard, adds, the "sickening part" about such lost lives is the question "For what?"

Since I am apparently not alone in this,¹⁴ I will admit for what it's worth that on a first viewing I too found myself resisting the later scene in which we see Lila distraught outside the White House, but I have come to think it powerful and justified. This is partly because I have belatedly taken in the significance of Moore's telling us in the film that the scene took place as a result of Lila's calling to tell him "that she was coming down from Flint to Washington, D.C., to attend a jobs conference" and that she "was going to go and pay a visit to the White House" on her break. It is also because I have now become convinced of the wisdom (human and political) in

Moore's giving such prominence to someone like Lila, a proud patriot and self-declared "conservative Democrat." And finally, another factor in there somewhere is my sense that my initial resistance was largely to Lila's expression of grief, to her tears. I have a tendency to too quickly equate such scenes with sentimentality and that tendency in itself is perhaps what I ought to be resisting: it may be more my problem than the film's.

We can see Moore's genuine concern for people like Lila and Wilton in a sequence in *Fahrenheit 9/11* that begins with Donald Rumsfeld claiming that the "targeting capabilities and the care that goes into targeting is as impressive as anything anyone could see" (intercut with shots of an area being carpet bombed, then of an "Iraqi baby's head being sewn up with no anesthesia"). This is followed first by newsreel footage of an Iraqi woman "standing in rubble – hysterical with grief," and then by Britney Spears ("looking," again – like the previous quotation – in the words of the screenplay, "bored and obnoxiously chewing gum") being interviewed by CNN's Tucker Carlson ("Honestly," she tells him, "I think we should just trust our President in every decision that he makes ..."). This sequence ends with Moore's voice-over narration pointing out (over "footage of Bush taking podium for State of the Union address – to large cheers") that "Britney Spears was not alone. The majority of the American people trusted the President, and why shouldn't they? He had spent the better part of the last year giving them every reason why we should invade Iraq."¹⁵

If Lila is perhaps less "old school" than Wilton (she wears what she calls "a multicultural, a multicolor cross" and says proudly that her family is "multicultural"), I suggest we might think of the two of them together at the conservative end of a spectrum of the various types we could think of as being included when Moore speaks of trying to "get the world back in our hands."

Moments of elation

This is an impressive crowd. The haves, and the have mores! Some people call you the elite. I call you my base.
—President Bush in tails, addressing a fund-raiser (in *Fahrenheit 9/11*)

Immoral behavior breeds immoral behavior. When a President commits the immoral act of sending otherwise good kids to war based on a lie, this is what you get.¹⁶
—Moore's narrative voice-over, as we see footage of US soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees (in *Fahrenheit 9/11*)

I will make my final point with the help of the four San Francisco Bay Area-based authors of *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. They start off by reminding their readers that on "February 15, 2003, and again on March 15, with the first wave of bombing by that time a matter of hours away, millions of people took to the streets to voice their opposition to the oncoming invasion of Iraq." This is what they then go on to say:

The marches began in Melbourne and Sydney, and swept westward with the sun. The centers of Rome, Tokyo, London, Paris, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Berlin,

Dhaka, Barcelona, New York, San Francisco, and a thousand other communities were choked with banners and echoing with rejection and disgust. Believable estimates the day after put the number of demonstrators in February between fifteen and twenty million ... The "embittered few" had become the disbelieving and contemptuous many.

In common with almost everyone, the writers of this book could hardly believe their eyes as they swung with the crowd into San Francisco's Market Street. Out of the torpor and humiliation of "politics" in George Bush's America had come, abruptly, a foreshadowing of a different way of life ... Where had this energy been sleeping? Why had the months-long combined opposition of Republicans and Democrats, aimed at making opposition to empire unthinkable – unrepresentable – so signally failed? How could it be that the idiom of the chants and placards, which for a moment made a world, had so unerringly decided on the proper form of reply to the predawn barrage of lies ...

We take such moments of elation seriously.¹⁷

But of course, as these authors go on to admit, "Elation is one thing, effectiveness another" (3). In the event, *Fahrenheit 9/11* could not prevent the reelection of the war President. But a mark of the film's authenticity, a sign that it is indeed a work of true artistry (even if – to offer an instructive contrast – it is less obvious *as artistry* than the work of the other great contemporary documentarian, Errol Morris),¹⁸ is that it can still produce moments of elation, even now. They signify what may still be possible and I would have thought that, in our present predicament, we can not afford to overlook them.

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NOTES

1. John Berger, "Foreword: 'The Work of a Patriot,'" to Michael Moore's *The Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004: (ix-xi) xiii.
2. Moore was responding to Rose's asking him "What has shaped you and your political thought?" See the *Bowling for Columbine* dvd. "Probably most important," Moore responded, "was the parents I was raised by."
3. Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, January 8, 1991. Reprinted in Kael's *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*, Dutton: New York, 1991: 242-45.
4. See *Bowling for Columbine* dvd.
5. Distinguishing between the individual and the institution, Chomsky says that, while "slavery, for example, or other forms of tyranny are inherently monstrous ... the individual participating in them may be the nicest guy you can imagine – benevolent, friendly, nice to their children, even nice to their slaves, caring about other people. As individuals they may be anything. In their institutional roles they are monsters." He says this, incidentally, shortly before we see Moore talking with Phil Knight.
6. Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," *Commentary*, March 1961. Reprinted in Roth's *Reading Myself and Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975: 120-21.
7. R.D. Laing, "Preface" (1965), *The Divided Self* (1960), Harmondsworth: London, 1970: 11.
8. Roland Barthes, "Preface," *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Noonday P, 1992: 12.
9. If this sounds a bit awkward, grammatically, it is (or seems to be) improvised speech.
10. See *Bowling for Columbine* dvd. In the rest of the speech, Moore suggests


that Americans need "to aspire to be more Canadian like." Moore's completely uncritical and highly idealistic notion of Canada is something that clearly needs to be examined but (not having the space to do it here) I will do that elsewhere.

What I perhaps ought to note, however, is that assuming Moore is serious about the possibility that his country may be "nuts" may help us better understand the kind of humour (anarchic, sick, crazy, sometimes almost deliberately-seeming unfunny, hectoring, stubbornly persistent) that we find him indulging say, in *TV Nation* (what little I've been able to see of it so far) and in his one, non-documentary film, the political satire (or burlesque), *Canadian Bacon*. The logic would seem to dictate that if we are indeed nuts, then it may take nutty, manic, disconnected-seeming forms of humour to restore us to our senses. I suppose it could be argued that Stanley Kubrick (who Moore says is his favourite director) was pursuing this logic in his film *Dr Strangelove*, an obvious influence on *Canadian Bacon*.

11. Chomsky is discussing the impact Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's 1992 film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* has had (see the dvd version).
12. Of course it isn't just a question of one fear: Moore's films describe quite a few. One he neglects to mention – fear on the highway, and the SUV as one answer to it (at least for those inside the vehicle – it actually makes me, on the outside, more fearful) – gets expressed in *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (Of course, some of the Supersize vehicles one sees more and more on American highways make the point even more forcefully.) I'd also like to draw attention here to something the fine novelist and short-story writer, Mary Gaitskill, had to say on the subject a few years ago in a piece on the film made from her story "Secretary." As against those who claim Americans want to be victims, Gaitskill argues that "this apparent desire to be a victim cloaks an opposing dread – I believe," she tells us, "that Americans are in fact profoundly, neurotically terrified of being victims, ever, in any way. This fear is conceivably one reason we just waged a grotesque and gratuitous 'war' in Iraq – because Americans couldn't tolerate feeling like victims, even briefly. I think it is the reason every boob with a hangnail has been clogging the courts and haunting talk shows across the land telling his/her 'story' and trying to get redress for the last twenty years." ("On the Film 'Secretary' – Victims and Losers: A Romantic Comedy," *Zoetrope*, Fall 2003: [102-5]: 105.)
13. Toplin informs us, for example, that the video "showing seven minutes of inaction after the president was informed of the attacks of 9/11 ... fell into Moore's hands with little effort. His research team called the Sarasota school to ask if anyone had made a recording of the president's visit. Sure enough, a teacher had set up a video camera to capture the important moment in the school's history. School officials were happy to turn over their coverage of the entire event" (43).
14. Toplin tells us, for example, that Mark Kermode, writing in the English Sunday paper, the *Observer*, found "the film's treatment of Lila Lipscomb especially troubling. Moore 'heartlessly records Lipscomb's anguish, reported Kermode, who felt 'growing revulsion for a film-maker who would resort to such tactics' (Toplin 53).
15. I have been quoting in this paragraph from the screenplay of *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the *Reader*.
16. There is, in this connection, an interesting moment in the exchange Moore had with Charlie Rose shortly after the release of *Bowling for Columbine*. Explaining that he believes Bush has taken the US into Iraq on the basis of a Big Lie, Moore says that the "kernel of truth to this lie is that Saddam Hussein is a really bad guy." "And," says Rose, "he has and wants weapons of mass destruction." "As," Moore adds, "do a lot of bad guys in this world." "The point is," says Rose, "he has them, and wants them." (See the *Bowling for Columbine* dvd.) Since Rose seems basically liberal and fair-minded in his sympathies, this nicely gives us a glimpse of the kind of consensus Moore later found himself up against.
17. Ian Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, (Retort), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London & New York: Verso, 2005: 1-2.
18. Their styles are radically different and I greatly admire both of them. Unlike Moore's, Morris's style is austere. Think, for example, of Morris's decision to do without a musical score throughout *Gates of Heaven* and of his reliance solely on the music of Philip Glass in *The Thin Blue Line* and *The Fog of War*. This, together with a much tighter, I would say narrower, conception of the subject under investigation, help convey a sense of purity, high art and classicism. Compared to this, Moore's works seem deliberately impure: their soundtracks are extremely varied (though mostly drawing, very freely, on popular music) and the visual archive material Moore utilizes is much more heterogeneous.

Assessing *V For Vendetta*

BY TONY WILLIAMS



"Wiser than lesser men, with their hands on the levers of power, did they know that no movie had ever brought about public upheaval, that no matter what was said in a theatre, no matter how long the lines were in front of the ticket offices for the most incendiary of films, nothing would change, no shot would be fired? Did they laugh in their clubs at the grown up children who played their shadowy celluloid games and whom they indulged with the final toy – money? He himself had never gone raging out into the streets after any films. Was he different from the others?"¹

—Irwin Shaw. *Evening in Byzantium*

"The minor talent thrives only when the climate is congenial, when the tradition within which it operates is nourished into vigorous growth from forces within the culture."²

—Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*

"People should not be afraid of their government. Government should be afraid of their people."

—V in *V for Vendetta*



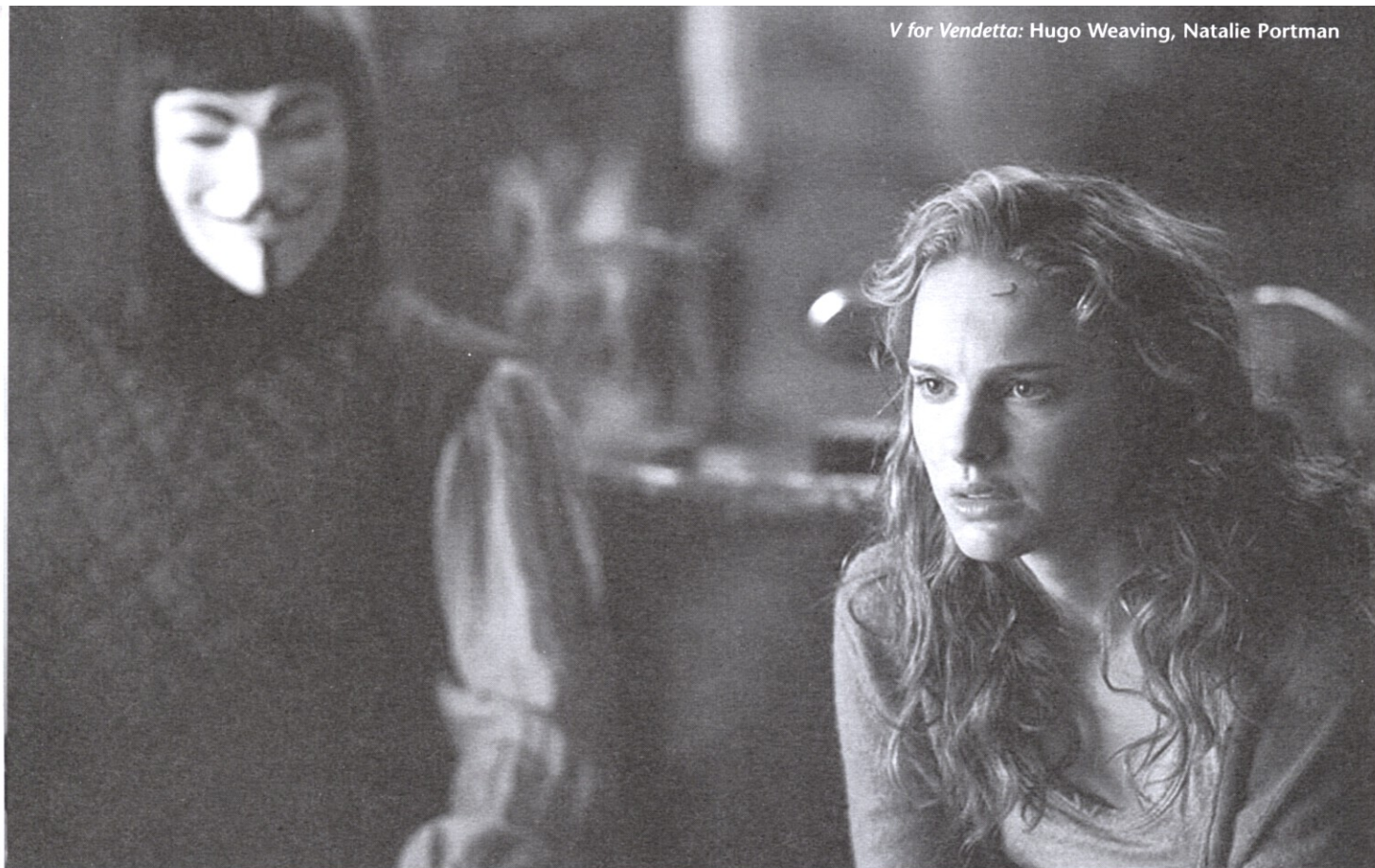
Hollywood cinema has recently begun a hesitant form of protest against the Bush Regime. *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Syriana*, *Munich*, as well as documentaries by Michael Moore and others, appear to represent a reaction against a political system now supported by right wing media alliances more powerful than those in the Vietnam era. Yet none of these films combine the two features of protest and revolution that this special edition of *CineAction* explores. They interrogate issues involving the past and present. But they present no real options for developing protest into revolution. Michael Moore's documentaries attempt to raise consciousness but never draw the logical conclusion that protest involves revolution. They only speak to committed audiences as opposed to those who repeatedly swallow lies from the White House and its media allies concerning "weapons of mass destruction" and Saddam Hussein masterminding 9/11. *V for Vendetta* (2005) is a film explicitly involving protest and revolution. Like Joe Dante's "Homecoming" contribution to the cable television series *Masters of Horror* (2005), it explicitly uses popular culture to attack the Bush Regime for its crimes against humanity. But, ironically, *V for Vendetta* has emerged from the least likely sources in Hollywood in terms of associations with politically radical cinema.

Any political film faces the type of reception described above in Irwin Shaw's novel which is set in the Cannes Film Festival during the 1970s. It was an era characterized by the

dominant presence of political films whether avant-garde (Godard) or commercial such as the work of Costa Gavras, Elio Petri and other directors. What difference would they make? Were they not products of cynical manipulation on the part of producers who would soon move on to the next profitable trend? The conservative swing of mainstream world cinema during the Reagan-Thatcher-Clinton-Blair and Bush eras would appear to justify the despair of Shaw's ageing, menopausal hero. However, over the past few years, a different mood has emerged. *V for Vendetta* represents a tentative development which might continue in ways not envisaged by its producers.

Britain as America

Although set in Britain during a future Fascist era, *V for Vendetta* is more relevant to America than Tony Blair's septic isle. Despite the predominant casting of British actors and geographical location, the film contains familiar allegorical dimensions resembling classical Hollywood's fascination with those old British Empire films such as *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and others which embodied wish-fulfillment fantasies of an emerging world power eager to take over the mantle of the imperial vision of a colonial power it outwardly opposed but secretly admired. (3) But, now, the vision is much bleaker and subversive. America is now the undisputed leading world imperial power having fulfilled that



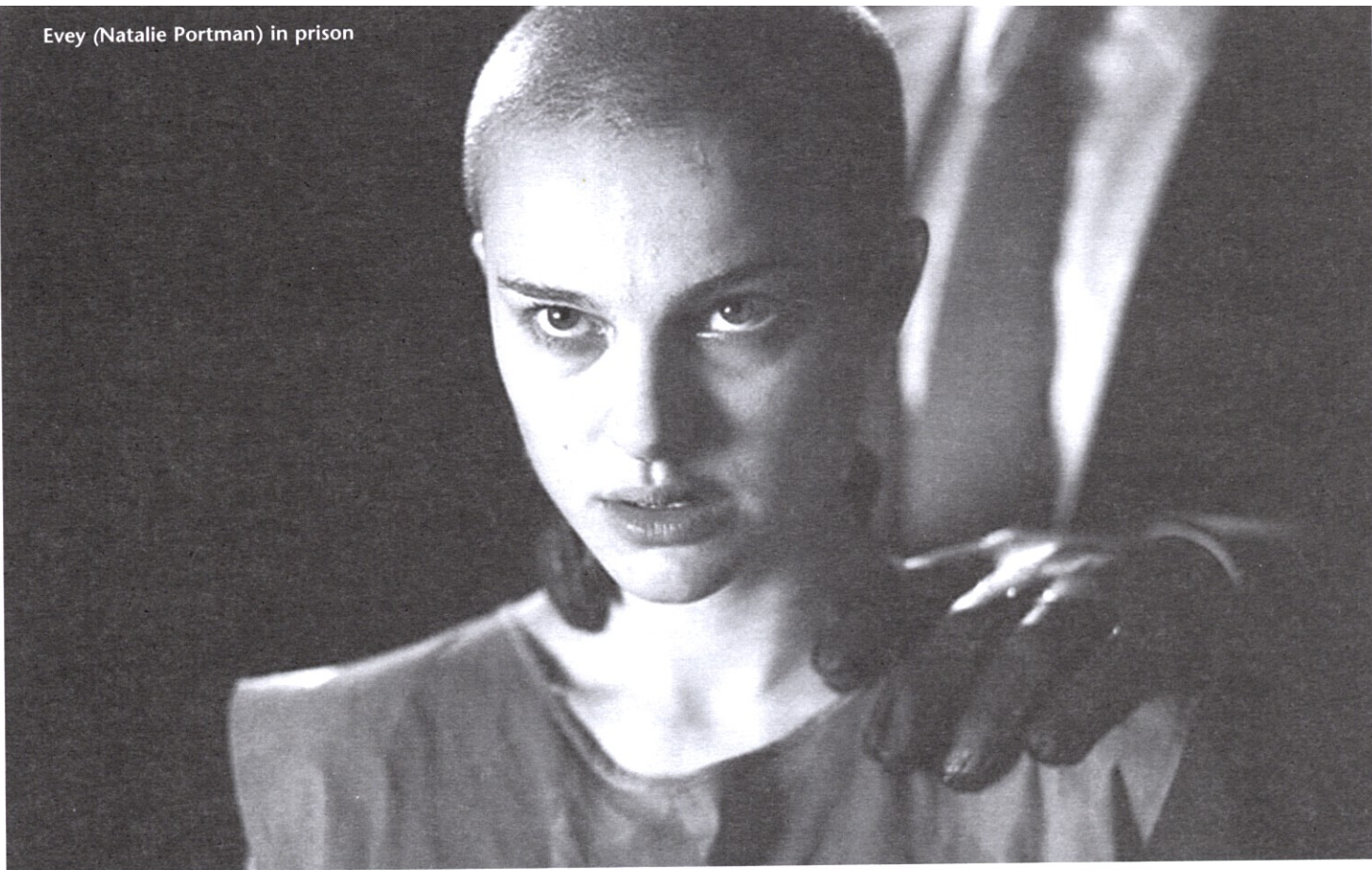
dark manifest destiny documented in the factually based historical novels of Gore Vidal beginning with *Burr* (1973) to their culmination in the ironically titled *The Golden Age* (2000). *V for Vendetta* represents a dystopian version of Hollywood cinema's tendencies towards ideological displacement.

Hollywood has frequently exhibited an ideological agenda whereby America's oppressive political activities are often displaced on to a foreign landscape typified by a non-American villain representing a convenient "other." Whether they be Bela Lugosi as the displaced symbolic persona of American colonial rule in *White Zombie* (1932) or Ian McDiarmid's evil Emperor in the *Star Wars* saga, these figures are all part of those convenient cultural projection mechanisms of a nation refusing to acknowledge its own evil political policies. *V for Vendetta's* England with its gay-bashing, spin doctoring news manipulation, Guantanamo Bay type concentration camps, and brutal authoritarian control really represents a dystopian version of contemporary America which is now continuing the legacy of Nazi Germany with suspension of civil liberties for suspected "terrorists", illegal confinement, government surveillance in defiance of its Constitution, torture, humiliation, and murder of prisoners aided by the complicity of an apathetic population who are the twenty-first century's equivalent of Hitler's "willing executioners."

V for Vendetta has received hysterical condemnation from right-wing commentators. It has also been rejected by its creator Alan Moore, various anarchist groups, and political internet sites such as the World Socialist Web Site for either not being true to the original graphic novel or failing as a political film. But *V for Vendetta* became number one in the American box office charts during its opening week and continues to do well financially. This suggests that it embodies a response to

certain feelings characterizing the contemporary *Zeitgeist* on the part of audiences living in the "land of the free" who recognize relevant parallels. Although this success may evoke the reservations expressed above by Irwin Shaw, it also echoes Robin Wood's statement that changing times may sometimes move even the most minor talents into directions they may never have envisaged before. Producer Joel Silver, Wachowski Brothers scenarists, first-time director John McTeigue, and Natalie Portman are not major talents. But they are part of a film containing oppositional feelings that could never have been expressed in a multi-million dollar corporate product a few years ago. Like most Hollywood films, *V for Vendetta* is designed to appeal to a youthful audience. Yet it also contains features which may nurture further thought, protest, (and perhaps action) against an inhumane system. Although today's Warner Brothers is far removed from its classical Hollywood counterpart of the 1930s and 1940s, the film significantly opens with black and white credits as if stating a relationship to those old social consciousness films of the 1930s that the studio was well known for. If Jim Kitses once wrote that "*The Wild Bunch* is America" *V for Vendetta's* England really represents an America rife for revolution.

During the opening scenes of the film *V*/Hugo Weaving blows up the Old Bailey. Once symbolic of impartial British justice, it has now become as redundant and useless as the current American Supreme Court. The climax of the film involves the destruction of the Houses of Parliament whose former relevance for democratic debate and representation of popular feelings has been contemptuously dismissed by "President" Blair in the same manner as Bush's attitude towards the State Capitol in Washington D.C. It is not stretching the imagination to see *V's* Old Bailey representing an American Supreme Court Building



inhabited by President Bush's right wing political appointees who will soon remove not only a woman's right to choose, as legislated by the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision, and approve torture of suspected "terrorists", but also return the United States to a pre-New Deal era of corporate fascism and racism typified in the 1920s by political corruption, the Ku Klux Klan, anti-labor activities, religious fundamentalism typified by the Scopes Trial, and oppression of minority groups. The film's Houses of Parliament mirror both the White House and Congress where Democratic politicians slavishly support the Bush Administration in warmongering and supporting unjust legislation such as the Bankruptcy Bill which will lead to massive poverty and starvation. Recent voting records of Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Illinois Senator (and future White House hopeful) Barak Obama, clearly show that the Democratic Party is little better than its Republican counterpart. Although several commentators have condemned *V* for its supposed support of 9/11 and terrorist bombers, *V* actually blows up buildings which are empty. He also follows Bakunin's anarchist philosophy that an act of destruction can also be creative. The film also ends by suggesting that others must continue to protest and make any future revolution a collectively democratic movement in the fullest sense of the word. As Bill Krohn has commented, *V* is a film produced by Joel Silver, "the poster boy for stupid films where stuff is always blowing up for no reason." But this time, "stuff blows up for a reason." (4) That reason is revolution. The film's climactic explosion is far removed from the nihilistic type of spectacular special effect that concludes flashy postmodernist films such as *Fight Club* (1999) where nothing really changes at the end.

As President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina revealed, people do not count in America – especially if they are poor,

black, and lack the means to escape from an area where reduced government funding resulted in destruction and a secretly desired goal of racial gentrification in a future New Orleans bereft of its deprived ethnic population. *V for Vendetta's* world is one where non-whites do not exist. Its England represents Ronald Reagan's racially pure image of "morning in America" where ethnic cleansing has reached levels far beyond current right-wing aspirations. Even belonging to the correct racial category is no real guarantee as Evey/Natalie Portman, her activist parents (who have been imprisoned for protesting against "rendition"), Valerie/Natasha Wightman, and Chief Inspector Finch/Stephen Rea all learn. Fascist official Creedy/Tim Pigott-Smith notes that Finch's mother was Irish and warns him about a racial heritage as dangerous in *V's* world as Jewish blood was in the Nazi era and Arab nationality is today in the United States of America.

Evey works in a demeaning position in a media company humiliated by a post-feminist boss (significantly dressed in the black color of the film's Fascist regime) paralleling those contemporary American authoritarian corporate women and university female administrators who often have to prove themselves if not "deadlier than the male" then more vicious than their male counterparts. It is a media environment far removed from later images of a past creative world inhabited by a woman who will become Evey's mentor.

V has also received criticism for not depicting its Fascist society in more detail. But *mise-en-scene* elements within the film supply alert viewers with sufficient information. The BTN television network is a government controlled body containing spin-doctored news and mindless entertainment designed to lull audiences into submission. News commentator Prothero/Roger Allam jeers at the economic and social chaos affecting

the former United States in a manner reminiscent of those xenophobic Republican politicians and vicious right-wing media commentators, such as Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly, who frequently mock countries outside America. Although played by an actor resembling Christopher Hitchens, Prothero is really a British version of Hannity and his Fox News counterparts. The security guard at BTN watches a trashy action show titled "Laser Girls", an obvious reference to the equally mindless *Charley's Angels* films as well as countless "dumbed down" series which today fill British and American television screens, especially Fox Television. A brief glimpse of another program reveals the type of racist "Arab bashing" characterizing contemporary American film and television. A demonic Arab sharpens knives in the background while a terrified white blonde female gazes at the screen in the foreground. Dissemination of government lies and propaganda represents BTN's ideological mission in much the same way as Rupert Murdoch's Fox News in the United States. BBC ethnic newscasters such as Moira Stewart are no longer present in a new world order hostile to diversity. Her white female equivalent is a twenty-first century version of 1970s BBC newscaster Jan Leeming who blinks in astonishment at viewers whenever she has to read the latest government lies. *V* blurs boundaries between Britain and America but its real target is the United States.

Scenes showing television viewers occur throughout the film. A working-class family, senior citizens in a retirement home, a pub audience, and middle-class family all stare at the screen until they become more skeptical and activist in the concluding scenes of the film. Chancellor Sutler/John Hurt uses the television monitor to dominate police authorities and population. Hurt's role has led many commentators to see *V*'s indebtedness to George Orwell's *1984* and Michael Radford's film version where Hurt played Winston Smith. However, the casting of Hurt contains another important reference. Hurt's televised image recalls his role as "FBI Agent" Fassett in Sam Peckinpah's *The Osterman Weekend* (1983) which was a caustic attack against television and authoritarian tendencies within American society. Fassett appears frequently on a television screen playing mind-games with John Tanner/Rutger Hauer and blurring boundaries between reality and fantasy. Sutler's goatee beard is not a reference to Lenin but to that other prominent Bolshevik Leon Trotsky who was responsible for the brutal suppression of the Kronstadt anarchists in the early years of the Soviet Revolution. To its credit, the film condemns both forms of totalitarianism, whether left or right. Sutler's title of Chancellor not only refers to the first and only Chancellor of the Third Reich but also, obliquely, to the current President of the United States who has now gained dictatorial powers thanks to an apathetic population. Despite media attempts at denial, it is common knowledge that Bush's family gained its wealth dealing with the Nazis during the 1930s and 1940s. (5) Such parallels are not unknown in America. The NBC television production *Hitler: the Rise of Evil* (2003) drew damning parallels with Bush administration 9/11 activities in creating a climate of fear leading to dictatorship. It led to the firing of its producer following transmission. During that same year right-wing Republican activists succeeded in pressurizing CBS to cancel the transmission of Robert Allan Ackerman's *The Reagans* on CBS. Containing a brilliant performance by James Brolin as an imbe-

cilic President, the mini-series contained damning indictments of Reagan ignoring the AIDS crisis as well as ignoring the pleas of Elie Wiesel by laying a wreath in Bitburg Cemetery which contained several graves of Waffen S.S. who manned the concentration camps.

Like Bush, Sutler has created his own climate of fear. He promises his people security at the cost of individual freedom and attacks dissidents and minorities. Sutler is a devoutly religious, former member of the Conservative Party (read Republican Party) who uses the circumstances of a biological warfare attack to sweep him into dictatorship. He organizes purges of working-class districts in London such as Islington known for high immigrant populations. His two chief targets are gays and Muslims. Although Britain is not free from Arab-bashing and homophobia, these pathological tendencies are more prevalent in the United States with a religious right dominating the agenda of the Republican Party. Several right-wing Christian groups in America actively disrupt the funerals of soldiers who died in Iraq claiming that the deaths represent divine punishment for toleration of gays and lesbians while Ann Coulter has proposed forced conversion of Muslims into the Christian faith. Although gay marriages are now legal in England, they are still opposed by American Democratic and Republican politicians who would persecute gays should it prove politically convenient. *V*'s homophobia is more relevant to America than England.

The memorial honoring the victims of the virus attack on St. Mary's School deliberately resembles the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. Its circular structure evokes Maya Lin's non-representational design of plaques which merely lists names. However, a representational image of dancing children appears before it paralleling those three "realistic" statues of Vietnam Veterans demanded by artistic conservatives such as Ross Perot who opposed Maya Lin's design until their demands for an alternative type of representation were met. The American Government's role in using the fabricated Gulf of Tonkin incident to gain support for the escalation of the Vietnam War finds its modern parallel in the Bush's Administration's phony intelligence concerning Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction." Many Vietnam veterans later died from Agent Orange, a toxic device whose deadly effects were as much denied by official authorities as Gulf War Syndrome is today. Finch finally understands that his government instituted the biological warfare attacks leading to Sutler's Fascist regime. Increasing suspicions concerning the Bush Regime's foreknowledge of the 9/11 attack, the Blair government's secret information concerning the July 2005 London bombings and the refusal of both governments to hold independent public enquiries also inform *V*'s ideological agenda. (6) These incidents parallel the findings of recent historical works suggesting that the American Government had prior knowledge of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which it used for its own political ends despite the cost of thousands of lives. (7)

V's Protest.

Hugo Weaving's masked hero comprises several images. *V* is not just a *Phantom of the Opera* figure. He is an individual. But rather than being a Lone Ranger hero who will rescue the oppressed from their ideological bondage and lead them into the New

Jerusalem, he will not belong to any future society. V models himself on Guy Fawkes of the Gunpowder Plot who faced a gruesome death along with his co-conspirators after failing to destroy the Houses of Parliament many centuries ago. V wishes to restore the significance of a forgotten historical event to make the past relevant to the future. During Guy Fawkes's era, the Catholic population was an oppressed minority in an England dominated by an undemocratic Parliament. Impartial justice was non-existent. V blows up the Old Bailey since it has now become a useless symbol in a Fascist society. His explosion ends with a firework display designed to warn the establishment. Like the American Congress and White House, Parliament has now become an obstacle to human freedom and has to be destroyed like those old statues of Communist politicians once dominating Iron Curtain countries. V's William Rookwood not only embodies Finch's "Deep Throat" but also one of Guy Fawkes's original co-conspirators. Disguised as Rookwood, V performs a similar role to Donald Sutherland's "X" in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) by informing Finch about the real nature of his society. However, V is no romantic hero. He has been physically and psychologically scarred since his incarceration in Larkhill. Subjected to medical experiments designed to find a cure to a deadly virus the government intends to use against its own people, V survives an explosion and becomes a quasi-superhuman monster. He can never live in a new society. Thus, he aims not only to raise the consciousness of Evey but also the oppressed population of London who will act collectively in the film's final sequence after witnessing the destruction of the Houses of Parliament. During V's first explosion, Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture plays from various speakers. It will also be heard in the last act. This classical number not only celebrates the collective celebration of the Russian people after the defeat of the Napoleonic invaders. It is also the work of a gay creative artist. This is not accidental.

When Evey awakes after her rescue by V, she discovers his "Shadow Gallery." It comprises objects he has rescued from The Ministry of Objectionable Material such as classical Renaissance paintings (one of which depicts the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian), popular cultural artifacts such as a cover of the boy's 1950s paper *Hotspur* and a juke-box which plays Julie London's well-known song *Cry Me a River*. The emotional feelings contained in her song evoke lines contained in V's earlier guerilla television address to BTV audiences, "If you see as I see, Feel as I feel..." Sutler's world lacks human qualities of emotion and sensitivity necessary for any civilized society worthy of that name. Paintings rescued by V and Gordon Dietrich /Stephen Fry significantly embody those very examples of "realist discourse" condemned by in the 1970s by *Screen* theorists because of their supposed ideological dangers of lulling audiences into passive political positions. But these "realist representations" now threaten Sutler's society. Movie posters from classical Hollywood films such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *White Heat* (1948) also inhabit V's "Shadow Gallery." Ironically, these belong to the "film noir" movement which once existed as an integral part of a Hollywood culture Robin Wood compares to Shakespeare's society in his recently reprinted *Howard Hawks* monograph. Hollywood films are now "objectionable" in a world dominated by Laser Girls and racist images of Arabs torturing white females! The appearance of *Hotspur* in V's gallery evokes that lost-world of 1950s working-class boys' comics

when words, rather than images, dominated texts containing far more positive values than those contained in those later aggressive Thatcher-inspired "laddish" magazines such as *GQ* and *Loaded*. Gordon's "Shadow Gallery" contains subversive political posters. One depicts Sutler's head on a Queen Elizabeth pound note. The image not only satirically evokes John Hurt's earlier role as Quentin Crisp (who had also played Queen Elizabeth in Sally Potter's *Orlando*) in *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) but also those iconic anarchistic associations of the 1970s punk rock movement characterized by songs of The Sex Pistols such as "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen - a Fascist Regime." V and Gordon also enjoy that gentle Brazilian musical trend known as "Bossa Nova" represented by Astrid Gilberto's song "The Girl from Ipanema" and the music of Antonio Carlos Jobim. Eastern culture is also taboo. Gordon reveals his most prized possession to Evey. It is a beautifully engraved (14th copy of The Koran which he admires for its beautiful images and moving poetry. As he realizes, this item alone will result in a death sentence.

Several critics such as Larry Gross note gay parallels between V and Gordon. Although Gordon denies that he is V, Evey sees him making the same breakfast ("toad in the hole") for her as her pinafore-wearing rescuer did earlier in the film. Both men conceal their true identities beneath a mask. V wears his to conceal his mutilated face. Gordon wears the mask of a heterosexual swinger in a vicious homophobic society in which he is "expected to invite young and attractive ladies" to his home to avoid suspicion. As he tells her, "You can wear a mask for so long that your face will disappear beneath it." While Gordon conceals his true face according to the codes depicted in Adrienne Rich's definition of the "heterosexual dictatorship", V's own face disappeared during his incarceration and torture at Larkhill. Since its inmates were exclusively gays and minorities, there is no real need to emphasize V's actual identity in the film since he represents a group rather than an individual.

V avenges himself on those responsible for his torture. They include Prothero, Dr. Delia Surridge/ Sinead Cusack (the film's female version of a repentant Dr. Mengele and J. Robert Oppenheimer), and Bishop Lilliman/John Standing. Former camp commandant Prothero is now a right-wing news commentator who has made a fortune from Viadox Pharmaceuticals which the film reveals as having resulted from experiments on gay and minority prisoners in Larkhill. Sutler is mentioned as being responsible for the very existence of Larkhill as George Bush is for Guantanamo Bay's concentration camp. Among Surridge's first batch of prisoners is Valerie Page. Surridge speaks of her victims in tones reminiscent of those contained within Rudolf Hoess's 1951 memoir *Commandant of Auschwitz*. "They're so weak and pathetic. They never look you in the eye. I find myself hating them". The gruesome Larkhill sequences not only parallel the German chemical company I.G. Farben's involvement in Nazi concentration camp medical experiments but also American government activities such as the Tuskegee Experiment (1932-1972) when impoverished blacks were used for venereal disease experiments without any information given to them concerning the actual nature of their involvement. Suspicions still exist as to whether AIDS might have been a biological warfare creation of the American Government. Evey's younger brother dies of ADZ making her parents political activists. A deleted scene depicted a young

Evey handing out a flyer to a businessman. It contains the words "ADZ DEVELOPED BY US MILITARY FOR USE IN MIDDLE EAST." V also suggests that the future "Avian Flu" might also belong to this category. Larkhill's concentration camp images are not only relevant to Nazi Germany but also to an America whose business community made profitable business deals with Germany both before and after Pearl Harbor.

Former Larkhill administrators such as Prothero have made money from biological experiments conducted on prisoners resulting in antidotes used to cure the government-created viruses used against its own population. Although analogies with Nazi concentration camp experiments are valid, they are also relevant to the American government. Before its repeal in 1999, section 1520 of the July 1997 Chemical and Biological Warfare Program approved the use of human subjects for the testing of chemical and biological agents by the Department of Defense. Like the Tuskegee Experiment, no provision existed allowing for the consent of human guinea pigs. During the Cold War, the military conducted hundreds of experiments on prisoners, children and pregnant women at clinics for the urban poor, psychiatric hospitals and mental institutions as well as using radioactive drugs on "lesser breeds" such as Eskimos and Indians in the 1950s. Such abuses continued until the Church-Pike Congressional Hearings in the 1970s which banned government and military agencies continuing these practices but still allowed private corporations to conduct them. However, since 9/11 and President Bush blaming intelligence failures on restrictions mandated by Congressional committees, these experiments have now become legal again. In 1977, a recommendation contained in the Global 200 Report to President Carter urged the development of a microbe which would attack auto-immune systems. Already under Development by the Department of Defense, suggestions were made that "undesirables" such as blacks, Latinos, and homosexuals would make ideal subjects for biological experiments. During that same year, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development publicly suggested sterilizing one quarter of the world's female population. According to reports in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the suggestion resulted from U.S. corporate fear of revolutions spawned by chronic unemployment. V's reference to a virus affecting the "Three River Region" also evokes memories of the Three Mile Island disaster several decades ago suggesting that even that incident may not have been accidental but another continuation of the American government's war against its own population which began in the nineteenth century when the U.S. Army gave freezing Plains Indians smallpox-infected blankets. (8)

Lilliman appears to belong to the Church of England. But he also represents those pedophilic priests the Vatican refuses to act against. In one version of the screenplay, he is described as having been on transfer from the Vatican. References to Lilliman as a "priest" on his way to conduct "mass" not only code him as Catholic but also relate him to those American criminal priests from the Archdiocese of Boston and elsewhere that the current rabid homophobic German successor of Pope John Paul (formerly known as the "Pope's Rottweiler") seems reluctant to take any firm action against. The role of the Vatican in refusing to speak out against Nazi Germany (and even aiding the escape of war criminals) still awaits detailed explanation today. V will take revenge like the hero of

Alexander Dumas's novel. But unlike Robert Donat's character in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934), he will not survive in the manner of a happy Hollywood ending. Before his final encounter with Creedy, V reads another banned book, J.B. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, suggesting the transitional nature of his role. No individual successor will take his place. Instead, the future hero will be collective, not individual, having "a thousand faces" in the words of Joseph Campbell, as the removal of masks in the final sequence shows. These people will develop a new society, not V.

Evey's Revolution

V and Gordon have saved classical and popular works of culture banned by Sutler's regime emphasizing that any future revolution will be cultural as well as political. It will also encompass two features often marginalized by mainstream revolutionary movements: feminism and gay liberation. Evey initially exhibits hesitation due to ideological conditioning following her eight year incarceration in a Juvenile Reclamation Project from the age of twelve after the arrest of her parents. We learn about her love of Shakespeare which appeals to V who speaks a language that has now become taboo in the Bard's own country. Before her arrest, Evey had performed the role of Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Viola is not only one of Shakespeare's most resilient heroines but also a character who appears in a delightful romantic comedy in which issues of gender and cross-dressing appear as predominant features. This reference does not appear in Alan Moore's original graphic novel. V attempts to raise Evey's consciousness but not for his own aggrandizement like the Phantom of the Opera. He wishes her to confront not only the oppressive nature of her society but also alternative and sensitive feelings that exist within her own personality that need to blossom like those extinct Violet Carson roses that are associated with Valerie Page which he uses in his revenge on those responsible for the atrocities at Larkhill. V/Viola/Valerie/Violent (Carson) references and the introduction to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose "V" Morse code introduction used to introduce Allied messages to occupied countries during World War Two are highly significant.

After Gordon's arrest, Evey finds herself confined in a prison resembling Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Like Larkhill inmates, her prison uniform is the same color as the jump suits worn by prisoners held illegally in that infamous outpost. During her interrogation she discovers a last testament written by Valerie Page, a former prisoner who has been incarcerated, experimented upon, and has since been executed for the crime of being a gay woman. Born in 1985 and nurtured by a grandmother (presumably belonging to the 1960s women's liberation movement) who once told her that "God was in the rain", Valerie poignantly describes her personal discovery of lesbianism, the traumatic "coming out" before her parents, and her first film in 2015 where she met her last lover before government persecution led to arrest and torture. The line referring to institutional homophobia – "I don't understand how they hate us so much" – accompanying the scenes of mass arrests of gays and lesbians – refers more to an America dominated by the religious fundamentalism of Bush, Cheney, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and right-wing media commentators rather than England.. Valerie ends her message by encouraging any future

reader to preserve an inch of life for resistance and delivering a final message of hope. "I love you with all my heart." Although Evey discovers that V arranged her incarceration, she eventually overcomes her initial bitterness and hate for her "savior" by identifying herself with Valerie. This occurs in a poignant scene. Evey undergoes rebirth in the rain once described by Valerie's grandmother in terms of its spiritual qualities. The film intercuts images of V's rebirth as a monster against a background of fire. Both characters are connected with Valerie. Although the film reveals that V took his name from the Roman numeral outside his cell door, we also learn that he also learned resilience from reading Valerie's testament. V tells Evey that the testament was the work of a real person, a sensitive woman having similar artistic inclinations as her own deceased parents. Despite his mutilated body and masked persona, V also represents another version of Valerie. Such a reading suggests V's bi-sexuality which also represents a key quality essential for any revolution attempting to change the "order of things" rather than repeating the political mistakes of the past. Fire imagery associated with V's rebirth represents vengeance. But he has also been touched by Valerie's legacy. V is torn by contradictions as the scene showing him smashing his mask through the mirror reveals. He initially relishes *The Count of Monte Cristo* for its relationship to his own masculine revenge fantasies. But although he finally understands Evey's sympathy for the subordinate role of Mercedes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, it is too late for him to express the same love for Evey as Valerie expresses towards those who read her letter. Valerie thus becomes the true center of the film. Evey achieves personal liberation through the agency of a gay woman rather than a male as in *The Phantom of the Opera*. After V leaves the stage, she will not end the narrative by loving Big Brother. Instead, Evey envisages a new form of community.

After the destruction of the Houses of Parliament, the crowds remove their masks. They include several characters seen earlier in the film who have died such as the two black gays arrested by the secret police and the little girl in glasses shot by a police officer. Like the Rookwood sequence, this does not appear in Alan Moore's original graphic novel which ends with Evey taking on V's persona and Finch walking towards an unknown future. Instead this conclusion represents a considerable improvement on the original. Both the living and the dead participate in a symbolic rebirth in which anything is possible for the future. Unlike the ending of *Fight Club* V's climax is not one of gratuitous individual destruction. Instead, it leaves the crowd watching a destructive act, celebrated by a fireworks display to the sound of the 1812 Overture, and challenges them (as well as the audience) to consider what creative possibilities may follow for any future revolutionary society that must not repeat the mistakes of the past. Finch asks Evey about V's identity. She replies in *inclusive* terms. "He was Edmond Dantes. He was my father, my brother, my friend; he was you... and all of us." But he was also Valerie, an inspiring figure from the past whose personal legacy Evey will continue both personally and politically.

Several critics fault the film for not revealing what form the future society will take. But V leaves this deliberately open in the same way as Karl Marx refused to describe a future utopian communist society. V's protest has led to revolution for those who made a necessary leap into political consciousness such as

Evey and Finch. The crowds outside Westminster have refused to accept media lies any longer. Everyone has to develop their own form of revolutionary consciousness. But it is a revolution which will not only involve Emma Goldman's joy at dancing ("A revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having") but also those finer forms of cultural sensibilities and respect for all human beings that Sutler's society and George Bush's America deny. By repeating the final scene of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, V supplies its own answer to what must happen in the future. As two young lovers attempt to climb the tree where Dantes and Mercedes are now happily reunited, the gentle tones of Robert Donat tells the younger generation to find their "own tree". It is a line meant to challenge the film's audience to confront the hideous nature of contemporary America and build anew in a much more humanitarian and positive manner.⁷⁷

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NOTES

1. Irwin Shaw. *Evening in Byzantium*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1973, p. 212.
2. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p.95.
3. See Jeffrey Richards, *Visions of Yesterday*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 2-220.
4. Bill Krohn, personal email communication, 5 April 2006.
5. See John Loftus, "The Dutch Connection: How the Bush family made its fortune from the Nazis." http://www.tetrahedron.org/articles/new_world_order/bush_nazis/february2002/09.html; Ben Aris and Duncan Campbell, "How Bush's grandfather helped Hitler's rise to power." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/september25/2004/html>; Eva Schweitzer, *Amerika und der Holocaust: Die Verschwiegene Geschichte*. Munich: Taschenbuch, 2004. As Mike Hodges notes on his 2004 U.K. DVD commentary for *Black Rainbow* (1990), the American population appears to be "indoctrinated" in terms of accepting the high degree of poverty and lack of proper medical care characterizing their country. Another type of indoctrination by the media also makes them the new equivalent of Hitler's "willing executioners" in terms of lack of protest concerning the appalling evidence emerging from Abu Ghraib while they choose to hide behind "Support Our Troops" stickers. For some revealing parallels see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996 and Samuel Fuller's 1945 documentary footage depicting the concentration camp Falkenau and its images of a nearby town whose citizens claimed ignorance of what was going on. This was shown on French television in 2004. I am grateful to the producers for supplying me with a copy. Significantly, in Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2006) a conveniently blurred family photo of the Bushes appear behind the desk of a banker who has gained his wealth from dealing with the Nazis in a manner paralleling the activities of Prescott Bush.
6. See recently "A Former Head of Star Wars Program says Cheney Main 9/11 Suspect." <http://www.prisonplanet.com/articles/april2006/0406mainsuspect.html>; Paul Mitchell, "Britain: More evidence suggest July 7 bombings were preventable." <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/mi5-m27.shtml>.
7. See John Toland, *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and its Aftermath*. New York: Doubleday, 1982; Robert H. Stinnett. *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor*. New York: The Free Press, 2000. Gore Vidal has frequently raised this issue in many of his political essays.
8. For relevant information, see James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments*. New York: The Free Press, 1993; Robert Harris and Jeremy Paxton, *A Higher Form of Killing*. New York: Random House, 2002; Leonard G. Horowitz, *Emerging Viruses - Aids and Ebola*. Sand port, Idaho: Tetrahedron Press, 1996; Horowitz, *Death in the Air: Globalize Terrorism and Toxic Warfare*. Sand port, Idaho: Tetrahedron Press, 2001; and "Secret Experimentation on Americans was 'Legal'." <http://www.all-natural.com/bio-chem.html>, accessed on April 10, 2006.

Bearing Witness

THE DARDENNE BROTHERS' AND
MICHAEL HANEKE'S IMPLICATION OF THE VIEWER

BY BRIAN GIBSON



The Dardenne brothers

I never really bought into this whole notion that characters have to be, first and foremost, likable. They have to be, first and foremost, interesting. You don't have to give Travis Bickle a dog.

—Paul Schrader

. . . without judgment, without judgment!

—Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), *Apocalypse Now*

The cinema seat is of greater assistance than the analyst's couch. Sitting in a cinema seat we are left to our own devices and this is perhaps the only place where we are so bound and yet so distant from each other: that is the miracle of cinema.

In cinema's next century, respect of the audience as an intelligent and constructive element is inevitable. To attain this, one must perhaps move away from the concept of the audience as the absolute master. . . .

For one hundred years, cinema has belonged to the filmmaker. Let us hope now the time has come for us to implicate the audience in its second century.

—Abbas Kiarostami, from a text written for the Centenary of Cinema and distributed in December 1995 at the Odéon Theatre, Paris

CINEMA AS COMPLEXITY

The great paradox of our post-modern (or post-post-modern?) world is that we know more than ever before and yet can ignore more than ever before. In our hyper-communicative, high-tech society, we can desensitize ourselves to the human rights injustices, environmental abuses, and war crimes going on around us. Even the flashing news bulletins, pulsing updates, and streaming information tickers only wash over, in their surface coverage and sound-bite interviews, the most inescapable political fact of our time: we are complicit. Always running counter to the free-will “choice” mentality of the economic dream—that anything is possible, we all make choices, and enough good ones can help us climb the rungs to success—is the basic political truth that we cannot choose the cultural, social, economic, familial, and genetic conditions we are born into and, to a great extent, constrained by for the rest of our lives. (I am using “political” in its original sense, from the Greek “polis,” or city-state, relating to citizens, and so considering everything as political—all vote-eligible, tax-paying citizens are part of whatever their country does.) Furthermore, we are even complicit in the compromised choices that we can make—as users of polluting vehicles, discarders of non-biodegradable containers, purchasers of foodstuffs manufactured by companies that also make cigarettes, members of a nation that is at war or supports war, etc.—and so we are constantly buying into a system that we cannot escape. The reality of our age, then, is a cultural consciousness of complicity which is so paralytically overwhelming to most that, for instance, people feel a sense of despair when confronted with the fact of global warming and continue their energy-wasting habits because they want to believe that they can do little on their own. Every single day, we are complicit—in that we are citizens of a society run by elites whom we elect and tacitly allow to broker power over us—in bloodletting, arms trading, profiteering, and wealth-hoarding. But such implication is easy to ignore when we are surrounded, soothed, and anesthetized by illusions of progress and convenience, from vehicles and consumer goods to technology and entertainment.

Yet the political reality of complicity is ever-present in television and cinema, whose visual propping-up of the patriarchy through the fetishizing gaze, for instance, is best explained by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey contends that “patriarchal society has structured film form” (14) and that “Hollywood style . . . [is based on the] skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” (16). More generally, I would add, the scopophilia created by commercial narrative cinema, in order to instill a sense of fetishistic desire in the viewer for the object being sold or person being glamourized on screen—“By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her

too" (21), or "it," whatever product, brand, or ideal is being advertised—is part of an aspiration-based, bourgeois-directed, mainstream televisual culture. Such aims may have been most effectively put into motion in the Depression-era United States, as Anna Siomopoulos traces in her analysis of *Stella Dallas*, when films such as the "maternal melodrama reinforced the consumer rationale of the liberal welfare state by suggesting that the sympathetic response of charity can substitute for a more pointed critique of consumer capitalism" (5). This televisual rhetoric has been countered, with limited success, by low-budget alternative filmmaking, often fuzzily liberal humanist in its aims, which still often uses conventional "reaction shots, glance-object cutting . . . shot/reverse shot exchanges," steady camerawork, and close-ups of carefully coiffed and made-up actors in order to "construct a spectator who identifies" (13) with the basically likeable central character; as Mulvey puts it, narrative films are structured "around a main controlling figure [usually male] with whom the spectator can identify" (20).

The camera, then, primarily as Hollywood has used it, is not only a tool for patriarchal but capitalist oppression, stripping and exploiting not only women but also the poor in its fetishization of a white bourgeois world,¹ where even the media "enables appropriation of images of violence as 'infotainment' to feed global commercialism . . . normaliz[ing] suffering and turn[ing] empathic viewing into voyeurism" (Kleinman 226). How, then, to take our cue from Mulvey, can "we begin to make a break by examining" oppressive cinema "with the tools it provides," namely the camera's gaze (15)? While Mulvey is interested in "daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire" (16), I wish to look at three recent European films which are daring to break with conditioned bourgeois cinematic expectations—of escapist, voyeuristic entertainment or well-meaning, heartfelt, liberal humanist drama—in order to conceive a new language of political cinema that challenges the viewer.²

Mulvey wrote that the "character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator" (20) and, unfortunately, such is still the case in most narrative films that come to your local cineplex today. Yet the three early 21st-century films discussed here respond to Abbas Kiarostami's challenge for directors in the second century of cinema by making the viewer privy to more while able to judge less, and in ways more profound and complex than Mulvey's example of *Vertigo*, where "the spectator, lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent legality of his surrogate [policeman Scottie], sees through his look and finds himself exposed as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking" (24); the Dardennes offer no surrogate, while Haneke uses a bourgeois surrogate, and both the Dardennes and Haneke undercut the conventional gaze of the camera on which the bourgeois viewer has come to rely in order to identify with a usually bourgeois, male protagonist. Mulvey writes that "Camera technology . . . and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (20). The Dardennes' *Le Fils* and *L'Enfant*, and Michael Haneke's *Caché*, however, offer unorthodox camera movements which are often not related to the protagonist,

Haneke calls attention not only to editing, but to the rewindable and fast-forwardable nature of recording itself,³ and all three films utterly undercut their protagonists' command of the stage. While most narrative films strive to "eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience" (24), the Dardenne brothers and Haneke draw attention to the camera and disturb the audience's usual comfortable distance in their recent films. These are not celluloid spectacles that reinforce the voyeuristic, usually male gaze, but transgressive, openly challenging cinema which breaks down those "cinematic codes [that] create a gaze" (24), reveals the viewer's complicity, and forces the viewer to bear witness.

BEARING WITNESS

The act of "witnessing" has been much explored in literary and cultural studies centred around trauma since the concept was first described by Dori Laub in relation to the Holocaust in her essay "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." For this paper, I wish to talk about witnessing through the lens of an organization that uses cameras to document the after-effects of trauma and injustice.

For the past fifteen years, a non-governmental organization (NGO) has been retooling the power of the camera's gaze for the defence of the poor and voiceless. Witness (www.witness.org), founded by Peter Gabriel and the Reebok Human Rights Foundation in 1992 in the wake of the Rodney King police beating that was captured on tape, uses video technology to document human rights abuses. Footage has been shown on news channels and at film festivals, and the purpose of documenting the plights of, for instance, child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo or youths mistreated in the California prison system, is six-fold, according to the website: "[1.] to promote grassroots education and mobilization [2.] to corroborate allegations of human rights violations [3.] as a resource for news broadcasts [4.] to catalyze human rights advocacy via the worldwide web [5.] to complement official written reports of human rights abuses [6.] as a deterrent to further abuse." Lightweight, concealable DV cameras make surreptitious filming easier, and this readily accessible, low-budget, direct means of political advocacy breaks with conventional sympathetic or empathetic films—see Alex Neill, "Empathy and (Film) Fiction" for an elaboration on sympathy as feeling *for* someone and empathy as feeling *with* someone⁴—aimed at middle- and upper-class Western audiences who may be interested in being enlightened and entertained about various socio-political issues, but are not so interested in being confronted by their inescapable proximity and power relation to them. Most important, the film puts the viewer—usually a target audience of policy- or law-makers—in the position of an eyewitness now faced with his or her sudden complicity. Now that the viewer has seen evidence of injustice and cruelty, how can he or she turn away without feeling responsible, in their inaction, for allowing such human rights abuses to continue? The films inculcate a sense of political duty, then, in the viewer-turned-witness, and this is the burden a witness must bear: to reflect on what you can do, what you can change, and how you can act.

The act of looking is rendered political, and watching *is* involvement; the witness is implicated in the event by beholding it—he or she must act on their knowledge and become part of the solution, or else they are allowing the problem to continue.

By breaking from the diegetic effect of a typical narrative feature film, the Dardenne brothers make the viewer a witness to the violence of poverty in, and Haneke makes the viewer a witness to, the repressive violence of the bourgeois world in *Caché*. In the past decade, these European narrative filmmakers have been concerned with exposing the easy bourgeois rush to judgment, closing the gap between have and have-nots, and confronting the viewer with his or her own complicity in the system.⁵ While in most narrative cinema, “the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content” (Mulvey 19) the Dardennes’ and Michael Haneke’s latest films turn that threat on the audience, disturbing our bourgeois complacency. The Belgian duo and the Austrian director point the way to implicating the audience by transforming the voyeuristic gaze of the camera into an eye of witness, thereby turning the usually passive, fetishizing bourgeois viewer into a political participant, someone forced to recognize his or her position as inextricably linked to and even complicit with the power relationships in the film, not casually removed from them.

BEYOND SYMPATHY

Grating Charitable Expectations in *Le Fils* and *L’Enfant*

We want the viewer of our films not to be able to explain where [characters] have come from and why they’re behaving that way . . .

—Luc Dardenne, in an interview with Geoff Andrew, February 2006

With *La Promesse* (1995), the Dardenne brothers’ third feature film, the former documentarians launched a series of dramas set in areas based on their childhood home of Liège, an industrial Belgian town. The film focussed on Igor (Jérémy Renier), a boy who had promised a Burkina Faso illegal immigrant, soon killed at his father’s building site, to look after his wife and child, even as his father covers up the death. *Rosetta* (1999), which garnered the brothers their first Palme d’Or, followed a teenaged girl (Emilie Dequenne) in her desperate quest to get and then hold onto a job at a waffle stand. Articles refer to the film in wild or warlike terms: a *Sight and Sound* interview piece is titled “Wage Warrior,” while the following month’s review notes that Rosetta seems to be “a latterday Everywoman seeking survival in post-industrial Belgium” (52), Rhys Graham notes that “Rosetta is, at all times, waging a campaign of war against the world” and Janice Morgan remarks that “We don’t view Rosetta, we intercept her, like a moving target at close range” (527). Luc Dardenne comments in the February 2000 *Sight and Sound* interview, “‘And we decided to follow Rosetta as you would follow a soldier in a war’” (24).

The effect of such battle-zone, on-the-spot camerawork is to make the viewer him- or herself feel pinned down, thrown into

the midst of a underclass struggle; the Dardennes are showing us that “everyday life, principally for the poor but also for other classes, does violence to the body and to moral experience” (Kleinman 226) and the consequence of the Dardennes’ filming style “is to implicate the viewer at all times” by never allowing “the luxury of distance” (Graham); as Nick James puts it, the Dardennes have so stripped down the “European tradition of realist image-making . . . as to provide something antithetical to spectacle” (24)—that is, a cinematic witnessing. The Dardennes force us to look at people and their relationship to the world differently by demanding “a violent intimacy with its subject” (Morgan 528). Yet in accordance with mainstream television and Hollywood film, the central protagonists—with whom tele- and cineliterate audiences are conditioned to sympathize or empathize—are still essentially likeable: Igor, a basically innocent young boy who hesitates to go against his selfish, callous father, and Rosetta, a teenaged girl desperate to get herself out of the trailer park where she lives with her alcoholic mother.

With *Le Fils* [The Son] (1999), however, the Dardenne brothers launched a subtle attack on their audience’s will to sympathize. The film begins with the camera situated a few feet from behind and slightly to the side of Olivier’s (Olivier Gourmet) head. We spend much of the film looking at Olivier from such angles, usually from behind and slightly to the side, yet the camera is rarely stationary. The effect is to put us, literally, in the shoes of the cameraman, not in the shoes of Olivier, the main character. We are constantly shadowing him, catching up to him, coming down the stairs after him, seeing him through panes or half-blocked by walls; we may even feel privileged to be there, a closeness disallowed by most films, with their medium and long shots. We are so visually and, it seems, physically near to him that the situation demands sympathy, an emotional extension of support.⁶ Yet the situation forecloses the possibility.

For the first half-hour of *Le Fils*, in fact (particularly if we don’t know anything of the plot beforehand), it is unclear what is going on and what we can even commiserate with Olivier about. We start to visually “know” Olivier, at least through his gestures—someone often agitated, someone concerned with cleanliness in the carpentry workshop, someone who stumps his cigarette on his boot, then puts it in the front pocket of his overalls—but we don’t actually understand what he is so concerned about as we watch him watching, looking through a window at an adjoining workshop at someone else. Magali, who seems to be his ex-wife, drops by his spartan apartment and tells him she’s remarrying and she’s pregnant. Olivier congratulates her, but remains quiet and withdrawn. Only we seem to have any access to him, however visually limited. Olivier seems increasingly concerned about a boy in the welding workshop, surreptitiously looking at him—their relationship is emphasized not by a conventional eye-match shot but by a sequence where we see the back of Olivier’s head, then the camera whisks over to show the back of the boy, who is walking away, then whisks back to show Olivier looking after him—but it is not until twenty-two minutes into the film that he speaks to him, telling him to come to his workshop after he has agreed with the local organizer to take this new boy, Francis, on as a student.

Half-an-hour into *Le Fils*, when Olivier tells Magali that



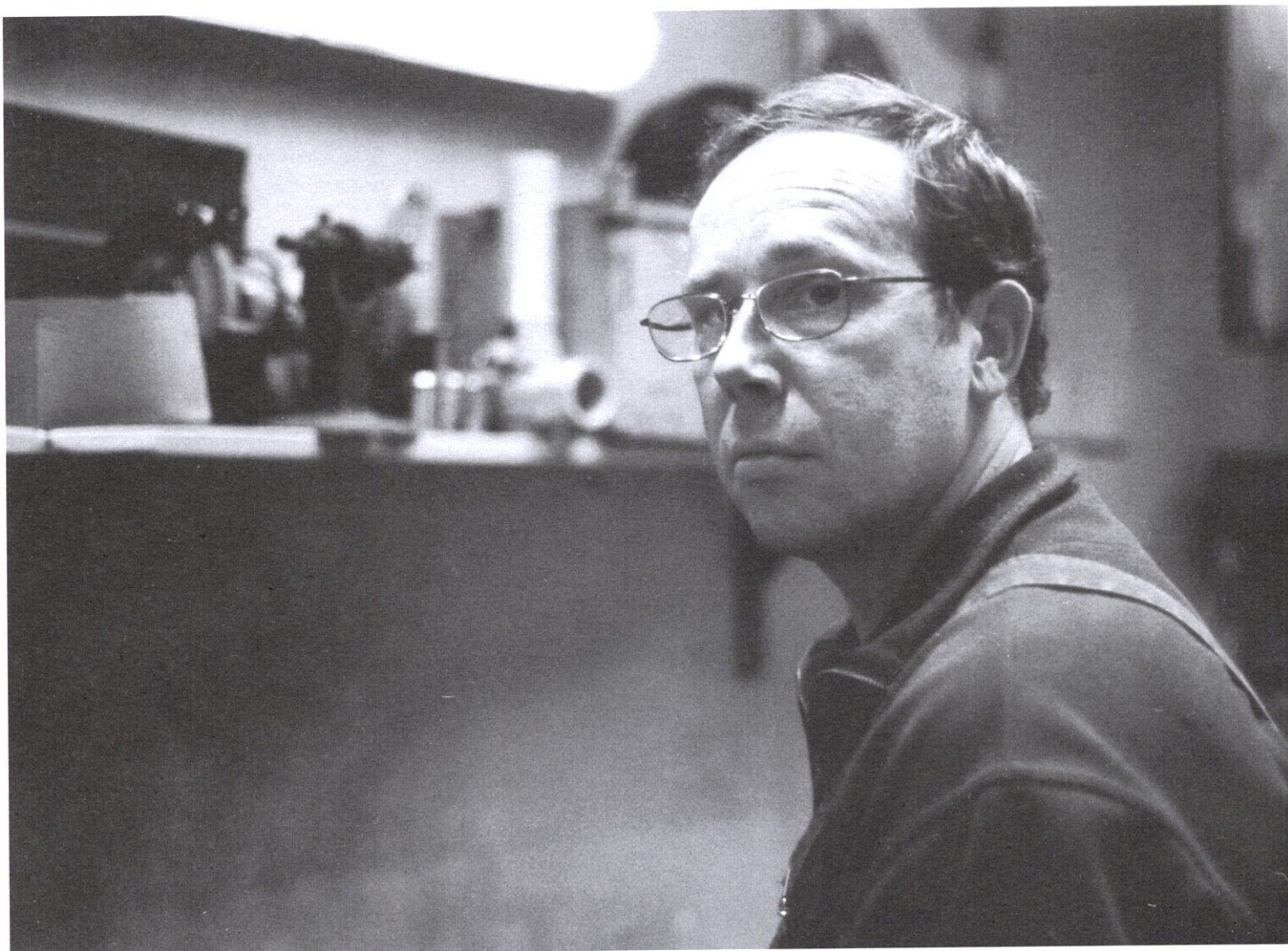
The father (Olivier Gourmet) with his son's murderer (Morgan Marinne)

Francis Thirion has got out of prison but then tells her that he is not tutoring him, we start to realize what is happening, yet still there is an unbearable sense of tension, of a wave waiting to break (in fact, this tension remained for me when I saw the film a second time—the situation still felt palpably drawn out as I waited for Olivier to tell his wife that he is teaching Francis), and the air of foreboding is not broken, but only thickened, when we learn that Francis was in jail for killing Olivier's and Catherine's son. Olivier is still stalking Francis after class, even sneaking into his apartment and lying on his bed, and he still is hiding the truth from Catherine, but the sense of tension comes from *not knowing* what he will do—kill Francis?—because we cannot understand why he is doing what he is doing. In this way, the Dardennes offer a suspense film that gains its mystery from being unsolvable by the usual fail-safe method of sympathy; the viewer cannot know what exactly will happen because he cannot “know” or feel him/herself in the shoes of Olivier.

“Who do you think you are?” Magali asks Olivier after spying on him and seeing him give Francis a ride home. Her look is of utter incomprehension, and Olivier offers no response. Her question is ours. Why has Olivier taken this boy under his

wing? To understand why he strangled his son? To reach for forgiveness? To wreak revenge? To perversely replace his dead son with his killer in a strange act of expiation? The viewer is forced into contemplation by the emotional distancing of the camera—we are always off watching from off to the side, a little bit behind the action, a kind of privileged passerby. By the end, when Olivier takes Francis to his brother's lumberyard, the tension is overwhelming, increased by Francis' wish for Olivier to be his legal guardian. Amongst the wood they will cut and shape, as Francis defers to his mentor, Olivier tells him, “The boy you killed was my son.” Francis runs, Olivier chases after him, they run out into a knot of trees, Olivier chokes the boy with his hands, then takes his hands off him, they both breathe hard, and Olivier gets up. Slowly, Olivier returns to the car, where he begins to stack the lumber and tie it up. Francis eventually comes to help him and the screen goes black, cutting to credits. The film ends by eluding any clearer understanding through words, leaving us only with gestures and actions to be observed and an atmosphere of tension to be experienced indirectly, through the lens of the camera.⁷

We may wish to grasp for meaning through metaphor and



Olivier Gourmet

symbolism. After all, Olivier is a carpenter whose disciples are young reforming criminals, and the movie is called *The Son*—surely the Christ-like parallels are obvious. Once again, though, the film punctures such convenient assumptions simply by immersing us in the details of the trade, as when Francis tests Olivier's ability to eye a distance to the nearest centimetre or Olivier has Francis note the types of wood they are examining in a lumberyard. The metaphor seems too easy and the world too authentic to make the film a simple, limited revision of a Messianic narrative. Most of all, Olivier's motives seem too unclear to make any Christian allegory stick. And who is the martyr—Olivier, Francis, or both of them? The overlapping impossibilities of the characters' own inability to sympathize with each other only complicate our task: Olivier lies in Francis' bed but still probes him for answers about the crime ("Why did you kill?"), to scant satisfaction; Magali and Olivier are utterly adrift from each other; Francis himself seems unable to understand the magnitude of his crime, referring to it distantly ("There was a death"). The Catholic notion of confession, which could lead to some kind of absolution, is thwarted.

The camera consistently emphasizes our inability to reach

Olivier, to try to understand what he is doing and why. Even in an angled close shot of Olivier's eyes, the windows to the man's soul are distorted by the thickness of his glasses. Thus the Dardennes break with the convention of gazing at the protagonist as he gazes back, that mirror-like cinematic moment of "recognition/misrecognition" that Mulvey details (18). Such a conventional shot of Hollywood cinema is crucial to the manufacture of empathy in Western film, for, as Mulvey explains, "the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously enforcing it" (18). A "typical" bourgeois adult viewer, I argue, in gradual reaction to the childhood experience of perceiving a mirror image of the self as superior (17), has come to regard the protagonist, so often shot in lingering close-up, as thankfully separate from him or her but worthy of interest (if only because said viewer is paying money to watch the image), and so sympathy is shaded with pity.

In *Le Fils*, the Dardenne brothers' avoidance of conventional, sympathy-manufacturing camera angles, in crucial combination with a mystifying situation, utterly confounds our desire to connect, however "truthfully," with Olivier. We want to



The 'happy family': Deborah François, Jérémy Renier

understand but cannot. Even as Olivier struggles to accept the freedom of his son's killer, we must accept our remove, our subjectivity, our inability to sympathize, an inability that flies in the face of sym/empathy- or aspiration-based television and cinema. This is the great success of the Dardennes' work—if a viewer does not leave the theatre or stop watching the tape or DVD of the film, they reach a point beyond sympathy, a political state where they can now, if willing, rethink their power relationship to the characters in the film and the situation they are in. What are our notions of forgiveness? How can we make a general judgement about child killers when faced with this particular, extraordinarily complex and realistic account of one victim's father's own effort to reconcile himself to it? The political collides with the personal: Olivier's grief is intensely personal, but the aftereffects of his grief, as shown by the Dardenne brothers in *Le Fil*, are profoundly political. After all, Francis is society's son—how do we, as citizens, wish to punish and/or reform such a person? Can we accept him as a citizen again?

All of the Dardenne brothers' films involve betrayal at their heart—Igor going against his father, Rosetta telling the waffle-

shop owner about Riquet's scam so she can take over his job, Olivier building up a trust with Francis that is based on a lie—and their films increasingly require us to betray our own deeply conditioned tele- and cinevisual sense of sympathy or empathy. The oblique camera angles, the focus on gestures rather than pat, transparent words of emotion, and the relentless, non-judgmental immersion in a distinctly comfortless, non-bourgeois world force most viewers to go against the grain of their will to sympathize and so judge the central character.

With their latest film, *L'Enfant* (2005), the Dardennes push their style and politics even further, forcing us to reconsider the bourgeois idea of charity and the fundamental dynamic of the capitalist system itself. Again, the camera shows us what we would see if we happened to be passing by one of the characters, but also drops away from faces to show gestures and movements that we might not notice. The camerawork in *L'Enfant* most clearly differs from *Le Fil* in the medium and long shots it offers; we see Bruno (Jérémy Renier) across a street or spot him walking along a bridge. The effect is twofold: to suddenly jar us *back into* our usual bourgeois distance and detachment

from the down-and-out on city streets, and to offer a brief, illusory respite for the audience before plunging us again into Bruno's world with stalking, off-centre camera shots. The distancing shots are also countered by the brothers' startling cuts between childish romance and harsh street life: a playful scene of Bruno play-wrestling with his girlfriend Sonia (Déborah François) in a park cuts to Bruno asking one of his hired thieves, "Have I ever screwed you?"; a shot of Sonia smiling as she mimics modeling a jacket just like Bruno's cuts to Bruno looking wary as they register the baby at town hall.

While the cuts jerk us back down into the mire of Bruno's life, the medium shots are the brief equivalent of coming-up-for-air because Bruno's main act of betrayal is, on the face of it, the most perverse, incomprehensible, odious act documented in the Dardenne brothers' four films—he sells his own child. Bruno is a mini-Fagin, a fence who has two boys steal for him; Sonia, out of hospital after giving birth to their son Jimmy, shows him the baby boy while he is more interested in a possible street theft that he is trying to coordinate. Living hand-to-mouth and often sleeping under cardboard in a shack by the river, Bruno quickly spends most of the money he gets from selling stolen goods (he has even let Sonia's apartment while she was in hospital). After one good haul, he buys a stroller for Jimmy and rents a convertible for a day, taking the three of them out to a park. The woman to whom he sells his takings mentions that families looking to adopt are willing to pay a large sum for a newborn. So one day, while Sonia is waiting in a long line for a government assistance cheque, he takes the baby for a walk, makes a call on his cellphone, places Jimmy in an empty room in a tenement building, where the baby is taken in exchange for 5000 Euros, and then Bruno returns to his shack. When Sonia meets him, he casually tells her he's sold their child.

Sonia's reaction is to faint, and the bourgeois audience's response may well be to retreat into a refusal to care about Jimmy or a growing disgust with him. The Dardenne brothers do not care, but relentlessly forge on: the camera continues to follow Bruno as he desperately tries to get the baby back, seemingly more motivated by Sonia's revelation of his son-selling to the police than by any glimmer of conscience; Bruno gets Jimmy back, but he must pay the thuggish go-betweens 5000 Euros in Sunday instalments in return for their loss of profit, or else. The Dardenne brothers offer little background to their characters and thus little context to hold onto, but rather than this lack of context erasing distinctions between or "normalizing images of violence" (233), as Arthur Kleinman argues, such a tight focus strips the Western bourgeois viewer of the opportunity to target an easy answer as to how Bruno ended up the streets—context can easily be reduced to "choice" rather than circumstance, and so the subject can be deemed unworthy of sympathy.⁸

By stripping the story down to an incredibly dire, tense situation, in which a young man who survives by stealing sees no problem in selling off his own son, the Dardenne brothers expose the bottom end of the capitalist system—Bruno sees a potential profit in everything. His heartless act is only the logical, trickle-down ebb of a heartless system. *L'Enfant* is interested in what hunger and poverty reduces the most needy and desperate to, not whether or not Bruno is likeable. But most bourgeois viewers need comfortable shoes to step into, and Bruno seems too unsympathetic and inscrutable. We see Bruno

and Sonia wolf down food, or the couple rub heads together like ragamuffin twins, or Bruno slop his sneakers in mud to mark how high he can jump up against a wall, but when we watch him with the stroller on the bus, en route to selling the baby, his face becomes a mirror of our own will to sympathy: we want to read into his features and see panic, or a glint of uncertainty, or even growing remorse. The Dardenne brothers offer dialogue that only further fends off compassion, as when Bruno says, in response to Sonia's query about getting a job, "No way, only fuckers work," or when, after he's sold and then got Jimmy back, he begs Sonia to take him back and, even after she closes her door on him, he knocks on it, asking for some money and food. Many of us, in these moments, want to shut down, turn away, condemn the character, and forget the film.

With *L'Enfant*, then, the Dardenne brothers film a situation so openly resistant to bourgeois notions of sympathy for the down-and-out—between heists, we see Bruno go around asking for change with the stroller, as it increases his beggar-marketability to passersby—that we want to take the film at face value, to dismiss Bruno as a lazy, thieving, selfish man-child unworthy of the charity of our gaze. Those first two adjectives are in fact contradictory—although Bruno may not be interested in a paycheque job, he is constantly planning and working, roving the streets in search of his next mark, calling his workers on his phone, haggling with fences, customers, and the boys who steal for him, begging for change, and even inventively fixing the wire frame for the hood of the stroller; in fact, when he sells Jimmy, he sells the only thing he's helped to make. Such activity is not, apparently, considered by many people—see critics' reactions below—to be "work," or at least certainly not the productive, admirable, moral kind of salaried work. What Bruno does not do is plan ahead—he spends most of his earnings right away, truly living hand-to-mouth, because he can't see much of a future, as emphasized by a shot of him being beaten up in a narrow entryway or the shots of him in darkened, small, bare spaces.

We want, as bourgeois viewers, to judge Bruno as a reckless, selfish thief who sometimes even wastes his money on gambling, but the effects of Bruno's actions snowball—the buying and selling of a baby, the hospitalizing of Sonia, Bruno's vicious beating, the endangering of a boy in a chase after a heist—hurtling the story far beyond the warm blanket of "trying to understand what someone is going through." Yet most negative reviews of the film still evince a strong desire to dismiss Bruno as unworthy of sympathy—he is too stupid and/or base.⁹

Matt Pais' review is viciously bourgeois-conservative; subtitled "Worst. Dad. Ever.," Pais offers eugenics in lieu of criticism—"Does this Cannes prizewinner prove that children shouldn't have children?"—draws on the welfare-bum stereotype in noting that the movie's only worth seeing if "You need motivation to pick a career," and reduces the film to a moral that exposes Bruno's apparent lack of intelligence (and thus, presumably, his lack of fitness as a father): "Bruno learns that his actions have consequences (duh)." Since the main character "doesn't seem to feel anything, neither will you."

Boyd van Hoejj's review is initially fair, but he misunderstands Bruno's selling of Jimmy and the obviously capitalist-industrial-production language of his excuse (according to van Hoejj, Bruno explains, "I thought we could always *make* another one" [my emphasis]¹⁰) as an "extension of [Bruno's and Sonia's]

fun and games," with Jimmy as a "pawn." van Hooij's criticism hinges on Bruno as a "particularly unlikeable protagonist":

The Dardennes have rarely created a more depraved character and the ugliness and eventual redemption that await Bruno in the latter part of the film are only of minor interest since it is so hard to identify with him. . . . The most interesting character is Sonia, but she is strictly seen from Bruno's perspective . . . Does he really deserve to be redeemed?

. . . *L'enfant* unfortunately suffers from a particularly unlikeable protagonist and the sky-high expectations that come with a Palme d'or; add to that the distinct sensation of "been there, seen that" and the film can only be considered as a minor entry on the Dardennes filmography.

George Wu inverts the usual approach by arguing that Bruno's actions can only be excused by his idiocy or callousness, but the film "does not present any convincing evidence that Bruno is either so dense or so uncaring as to be remotely capable of selling his son on a whim." The actor Renier's "essential decency" makes "his character's transgression" unbelievable. Yet what of the capitalist system surrounding Bruno? Another critic entrenched in the system's "reasonable" rhetoric of empathy, judgment, and choice, Wu so ignores the obvious climate of callous capitalism that has raised Bruno that he in fact suggests deeply *bourgeois* and oh-so-reasonable (i.e., responsible, right, intelligent, and moral) possibilities for Bruno's callousness that the Dardennes should have used, possibilities that seem to come from a brochure about the downsides of starting a family: "the time-consuming responsibilities of raising a child . . . stress and nagging from an inexperienced mother, the financial costs overwhelming his means – but none of this is addressed." Wu, like other critics, wants a framework of "reasonable," middle-class context in which to pin Bruno down—they want to understand where Bruno comes from, in order to better track his missteps and judge his choices. Ultimately, like Pais, Wu must reduce the refusal-to-judge-mentality of the film and its milieu to not only an easy moral but a formula: "one has to wonder how much longer the brothers can fruitfully milk their working-class-folks-finding-themselves-in-existential-moral-quandary stories."

Richard Roeper, on his TV movie review show with Roger Ebert, likewise breezes over the obvious socio-economic context of the film and calls Bruno someone "with a dull imagination, a small conscience, and kind of a tiny brain . . . to this idiot, selling the child seems a natural extension of his daily hustle." To Roeper, the film seems to be a sort of Euro-drama *Jackass*, with "scene after scene of them being stupid," especially since "there is a little bit of a chance there for them" to get a job—why don't they simply disregard their circumstances, their conditioning, their habits, an internalized sense of capitalism at its most basic, and make the right choice? While Ebert opposes Roeper's thumbs-down verdict, he himself uses the rhetoric of Hollywood voyeuristic cinema in noting that the film has "got a very intent gaze" and concludes, "I agree they're idiots . . . this is about stupid people doing dumb things."

The most sophisticated and airily unimpressed of the negative reviews comes from *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane, whose criticism is rife with snobbery. He effectively disparages the

pair's obvious love—"you would struggle to describe [Sonia and Bruno] as a couple"—and remarks of Bruno, "the Devil seems to have entered his spirit and drained it of charm." The language of sin here is, while partly tongue-in-cheek, revealing and Lane reiterates van Hooij's wish that they see more of Sonia—a bizarre, perhaps sexist-voyeuristic desire, since the moral dilemma and central tension of the story entirely resides within and is fuelled by Bruno. Substituting his own "misplacement" with another, Lane writes that making "the directors' decision to make Bruno the focus of their concern seems entirely misplaced."

Lane fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the Dardennes' films. They are not "concerned" with the dispossessed, down-and-out, but with offering, as best possible, a drama that simply documents a crucial moment or crisis in an underclass worker's life. The inclination for concern, empathy, judgment, and evaluation—clearly staples of not just audiences, but film reviewers, though the chicken-and-egg question could be raised here: do reviewers in large part create and/or exacerbate viewers' will to empathy?—comes from the viewer and it is precisely this impulse that the Dardennes are testing.

Lane's review is, essentially, a more erudite phrasing of Pais' concerns. After all, Lane concludes, Bruno is a "half-wit stuck in adolescence." In the bourgeois rhetoric, a lack of intelligence is virtually interchangeable with a lack of substance, depth, and morality, and so adds up to a character who is entirely lacking interest and a wasted subject for a film. Pais' main problem with the movie is that Bruno "never shows a hint of emotion towards his son. He's a convincing and well-drawn prick, but his redemption doesn't feel earned." Lane writes that "Viewers in Europe have swooned, it is said, at this movie's painful inching toward redemption." His half-ironic, half-snooty description of those in the Old World "swooning" is based on an unknown source, but his concern with redemption is reflective of a number of critics' conclusions about the film's ending, and this need to see Bruno as a not-too-far-gone figure or worthy of "redemption" exposes the roots of Old Testament, Judeo-Christian judgmentalism beneath the creeping bourgeois notion of sympathy, that metaphorical extension of holier-than-thou charity to the lost soul on screen.

The wish for redemption at the end of the film shows how frustrated many critics are in their will to sympathy as they watch *L'enfant*; they eagerly return to the idea that the film has been worth watching because it offers a sense of—or, to Lane, Pais, and others, that it is a flawed film because it doesn't sufficiently show—Bruno's discovered virtue/hope/conscience at last. So the callous man-child is now a redeemable, likeable figure.

Yet the final scene is moving simply because it is a moment of naked emotion. As in the final shot of *Rosetta*, where a stubborn, job-scrabbling girl finally breaks down, we see the removal of Bruno's tough, street-hardened mask for an instant, and his burst into tears reveals his sense of despair, and/or sadness, and/or heartbreak at being in prison and away from Sonia. Bruno also finally shows some concern for Jimmy, asking about him, but this does not suggest any sort of redemption, but simply hints at a possible maturity (already evidenced by Bruno turning himself in), perhaps prodded still further by his time in prison, the only place where society now must take an interest and recognize its stake in Bruno; Bruno's last home in the film

emphasizes that he is as much a citizen as the viewer and that we have a basic political duty to be interested in his story.¹¹

The point is that we cannot know precisely why Bruno cries or what he feels. And that is the basic drive behind the Dardenne brothers' film—not to make you connect, or relate, or feel for a character—but to realize that you cannot know, to surrender to the truth that, as a viewer, you are *not* a woman trying to get a job at a waffle stand, or a man mentoring his son's killer, or a young man selling his own child, but that, for ninety minutes, you can watch a woman trying to get a job at a waffle stand, or a man mentoring his son's killer, or a young man selling his own child. The least, indeed only, position we can take in these chronicles of people struggling to get by, is as witness, not judge. The Dardennes simply turn our attention to those we would usually ignore or think nothing of, as in *Rosetta*, where they explained in an interview with Richard Kelly, "in our look Rosetta sees she has a right to be there, that she belongs in society" (24). This is not the gaze of evaluation or dismissal, but the look as a conferral of dignity and respect. Here is cinema that directs the viewer to step outside his or her bourgeois Self and defer to the Other because that should offer a chance at re-evaluating the Self in relation to others and the system of power, rather than allow for increased efforts to justify, preserve, and retreat into one's privileged, comfortable, long-inhabited system of power. The Dardennes attempt, then, to remove the bourgeois viewer from his or her bubble of desensitization by sabotaging their usual response of conveniently displacing emotions (whereby, for instance, sympathy can lead unconsciously to: relief that you're not in that person's shoes, judgment as to why that person is there, convenient compartmentalization/labelling of that person, then moving on to apathy and self-satisfaction). In *Caché*, a film that competed with *L'Enfant* at Cannes in 2005, Michael Haneke offers a thriller set in a more specific historical moment which also explores a cycle of displacing emotions even as it more provocatively and disturbingly confronts the bourgeois viewer's desire to empathize, understand, explain, and control.

BEYOND EMPATHY:

Bourgeois Self-Reflection in *Caché*

All of us have such hidden corners in our lives, we all feel guilty, about the relationships between the industrialized world and the third world . . . But each of us pulls the blanket over our heads and hopes that the nightmares won't be too bad.

—Michael Haneke, in an interview with Karin Badt at Cannes, May 2005

Caché begins by thoroughly unsettling the viewer's expectations of the camera itself as a reliable eye. The opening image is a long shot, from an alleyway, of a house, and it seems to be an "objective" or "omniscient" POV shot, since the film's credits scroll across it in fine print. This shot runs for nearly three minutes and then we hear two people in voiceover, who seem to be talking about the shot itself. The camera cuts to a man leaving the house we had been looking at, in order to go out and try to

see the position in the alley where the camera had been. Then we see the long shot of the couple's house again, but now one of them rewinds the image, and we realize that our position has been wrong—we are looking at a tape made by someone else. Thus Haneke infuses not just the story—ostensibly a thriller—but the very medium of the film itself with uncertainty and threat; the recorded shots are taken from fixed positions, but the objective shots are often still, too, and the camera moves little, following characters slowly. We watch an image, unsure of whether it is an objective/omniscient POV shot in the narrative present or a "subjective" shot recorded by someone else in the narrative past (and possibly being watched not only by us at the moment, but by one of the characters in the film in the narrative present). We may well, like Georges (Daniel Auteuil) and Anne (Juliette Binoche) in the film¹²—particularly in light of a fascinating detail hidden in the final shot of the film—rewind parts of the film ourselves in an effort to spot clues about who is sending the tapes to them and why. And so Haneke also undermines the usual power of cinema to offer "a satisfying sense of omnipotence," usually via a powerful male protagonist (Mulvey 20), while unsettling our sense of camera point-of-view, as in his *Code Inconnu*, thus "depriving us of critical [and judgmental] distance" (Wood 42).

The setting of the film, though, seems to offer surer ground and appeal to our empathy, where we wish to feel *with* the protagonists, for they are like us. Georges' and Anne's house is large and well-appointed, a space we're used to seeing as the bourgeois backdrop in countless mainstream films. The markers of material and intellectual success are all there: a gated courtyard out front; a beautiful kitchen inside; dinner parties with friends; bookcases stacked with spines of various texts; an expensive, recently bought car. These, then, are smart, upper-middle class, hard-working people we can relate to, even aspire to. They may fight a little, their friends may try a little too hard to be witty conversationalists, but this urban, bourgeois, intellectual milieu is recognizable, understandable, even desirable in some ways. Anne and Georges' lives here, as in *Code Inconnu*, are "the closest to the experiences of the majority of the film's potential spectators (white, western, middle-to-upper class, the 'arthouse' audience), hence [they are] the character[s] whose experiences, actions, decisions we can most readily relate to our own" (45).

As the film progresses, though, our innate empathy—bolstered, of course, by the camera's attention to Georges (we are even shown his dreams) and the sense that he is being threatened by person(s?) and forces unknown—is shaken. The videotapes, first of the house, then of the house at night, then of Georges' childhood home, then of a tenement apartment in Paris, continue to arrive, wrapped in child-like drawings of a man vomiting blood. Georges seems to know what the drawings refer to, but he covers up, even lying to his wife about the man he meets at the apartment, until she plays a new tape that's arrived, a tape that's recorded their meeting, continuing for an hour after Georges leaves, when Majid cries. Georges still won't tell her his "hunch," and he is now lying so often he seems sociopathic. When the truth leaks out of him—the man is Majid, the son of Algerian farmhands at Georges' parents' estate who was orphaned when his parents were killed at a 1961 demonstration in Paris; Georges was jealous of the boy getting his own room and taking attention away from him, so he prob-

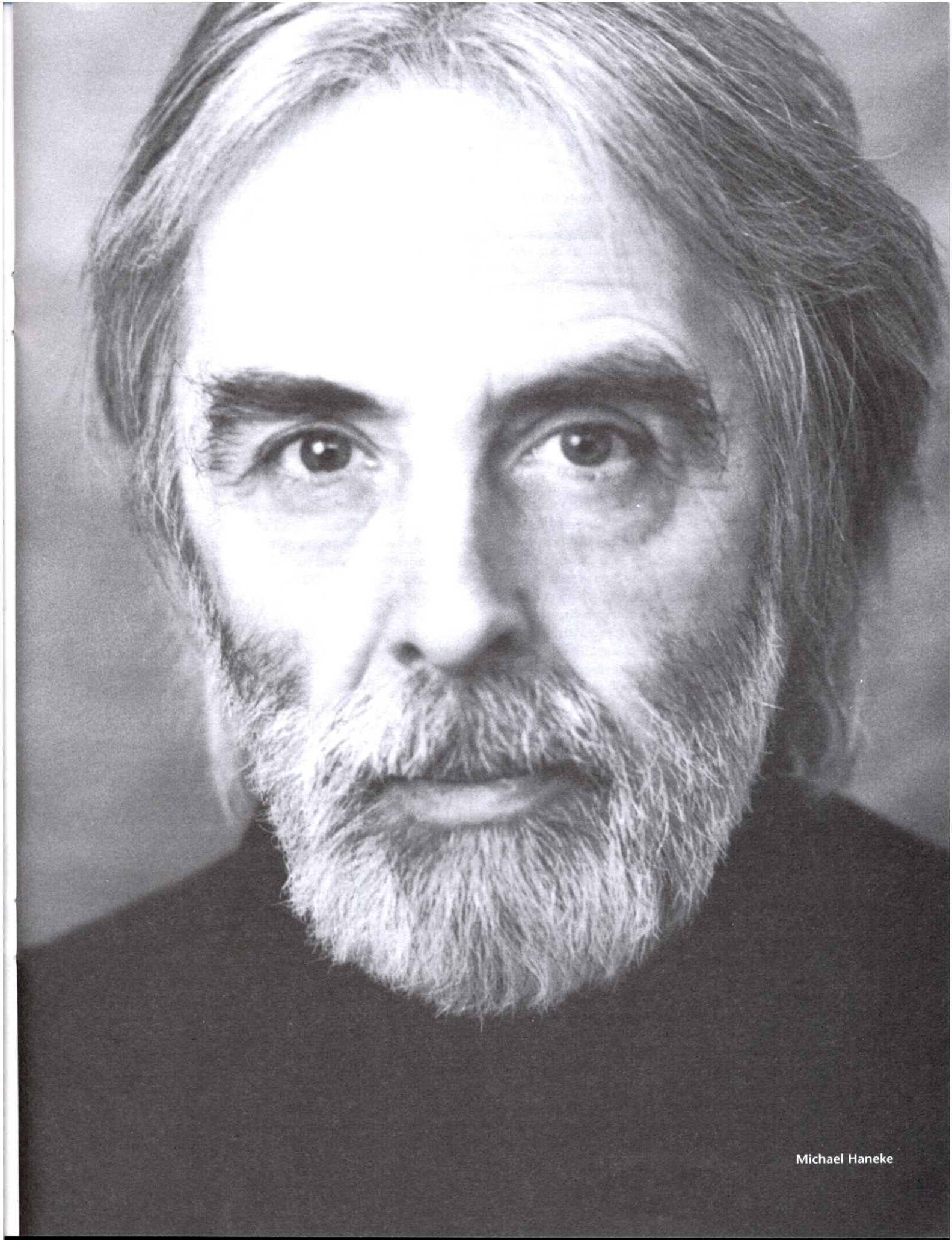
ably lied about the boy coughing up blood and certainly lied about Majid threatening him, convincing his parents that he be taken away—we begin to realize that the six-year-old Georges, mirroring France's treatment of the colony (recall Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*) and Algerians at home, unthinkingly demonized this Other in his midst, ensured that he would have a poorer education, denied him access to a middle-class world of greater opportunity, and protected his advantageous status as a privileged, white, bourgeois male. Now, though, inexcusably, when faced with his guilt, Georges continues to demonize Majid, certain that he is sending the tapes. Even after he goes to Majid's apartment and watches, aghast, as the man repeats that he is innocent and slits his throat in front of him, he does not report the death to the police (in fact, it is never clear if he reports the death, nor is it clear if the shot of Majid killing himself is from an objective POV or the POV of the recorder's hidden camera—it's from the same angle and place as the earlier recording of Majid's and Georges' first meeting). And when he is followed to his office by Majid's son (the adoption of a bourgeois, polite, reasonable tone by Majid and his son in their conversations only further unnerve Georges), he takes him aside, into the men's room, angrily declaring to the orphan:

You're sick. You're as sick as your father. I don't know what dumb obsession he fed you but I'll tell you this. You'll never give me a bad conscience about your father's sad or wrecked life. I'm not to blame! Do you get that? If ever you try to hurt me or my family, you'll regret it.

With this vicious, arrogant rant to a young man who's just lost his father—in part because of Georges initiating their arrest by police because he suspected that they had kidnapped or hurt his missing son, Pierrot (who in fact stayed overnight at a friend's house but didn't call)—any lingering empathy we may have had for Georges is gone. Georges' clear threat to Majid's son makes us realize that the bourgeois world we have been witnessing is the home front in acts of one-way, pre-emptive class warfare. The difference between objective and subjective POVs is echoed in the disparity between Georges' and Majid's worlds, a gap that now, with Georges' blasphemous, hateful words, seems truly obscene. Georges feels threatened when his family's enclave is taped and then those tapes enter his bastion of power; he is resentful when Anne brings up the tapes in front of company; when his TV show producer receives a tape, he is worried about the damage to his professional status and public image; he assumes Majid is trying to extort money from him with the tapes; he turns on Majid's son in the men's room because the young man calls out to him in his workplace, to Georges' embarrassment and professional shame. The genre of the thriller, the mystery of "whodunit?" and the uncertainty of who is behind the camera leads the empathetic bourgeois audience to worry about the mysterious threat to Georges as we buy into his and Anne's apparent, constant "concern" for themselves and their son, which is actually a concern for holding onto their world of privilege, a successful life ensured by his betrayal of Majid when they were young. "It's not your concern," he tells her when trying to keep the nature of his "hunch" from her, and she retorts, "If it's not my concern, business as usual. Would you like dinner? Or perhaps I can get you another drink?" In her sarcasm, Anne hits on the true sore spot,

but then retreats into worrying again about, as Haneke puts it in the interview included on the DVD, "the false ideal of the family, to keep secrets as they are, to deal only with the husband's secret" and hide her own, rather than condemn Georges' past actions concerning Majid (we don't see either of them show any concern for Majid when he cries on the tape; Anne has seen it already or fast-forwarded through it, she stops playing it, and they start to argue). For the real threat has come from self-justifying Georges all along, with his instinctive, almost feral, need to preserve his privilege, to hold onto his upper-middle-class turf and keep its trappings from becoming truth-revealing traps.

We now realize that our second, more certain position, that of where we stand as viewers in empathetic relation to the plight of Georges and Anne, is as false as our assumptions about the camera. We see just how flimsy Georges' and Anne's propped-up world is. After all, their living- and dining-rooms, surrounded by bookcases, resemble the set constructed for Georges' TV show. The dinner parties mirror the staged, edited conversations on the show (at one point, we watch the show only to realize it is not "live," but a tape that Georges is helping to cut and edit, another reminder by Haneke of the selectiveness of memory, the fragmentary nature of reality, and the impossibility of objective truth). The Laurents' work and home routine is like a loop of video footage; we see Pierrot, who is on the school swim team, practice his turns off the pool wall over and over. In his stubborn efforts to protect his family by not telling Anne, for a long time, and never telling Pierrot the truth of what he did to Majid, Georges suggests that he sees his family as both the ultimate and most illusory symbol of his upper-middle class success. (Perhaps more illusory than he knows, as it's suggested that Pierrot may not be his son, but the child of Anne and her lover Pierre, who, in another indictment of the public-private blurring, incestuous world of upper-middle class privilege, is also Anne's boss; Georges says to his mother, "Her boss is a friend of ours," and she replies, "Very handy.") When Georges fails to resolve matters himself, he can fall back on his bourgeois world for help: he got his parents to turn to an orphanage to remove Majid when they were young; now he turns to the police in order to harass and arrest Majid and his son; he turns to the medical establishment for pills that can ease his nerves. In response to his covered-up guilt, he continues to demonize the boy he had got rid of all those years ago, claiming that even now "he has a pathological hatred of my family" and that Majid is still convinced he was hard done by. Yet the hypocritical, self-righteous Georges' dishonesty about his past crime, to himself, his family, and to Majid, is what has led to the surveillance and sinister sketches; indeed, his and our concern for Pierrot ironically blind us to the possibility that Pierrot is the concern (Pierrot is sent a card with one of the sketches on it, but we do not know if he or Majid's son did so to avert suspicion from him or them, or if the videotaper sent it to him in order to make Georges afraid for his son). After Georges' dream-like memory of Majid taken away from his home against his will (shot at the same distance as the tapes of the Laurents' home, thus visually connecting the surveillance and its motivation) comes the film's final shot, held for minutes, with the credits rolling over it—the camera, likely adopting an "objective" POV, fixes its gaze on the entrance to Pierrot's school entrance. Once before, in a closer shot, we had



Michael Haneke

seen this place, when Georges had picked up Pierrot, concerned for his safety. A careful viewer now sees that Majid's son enters the shot from the lower right, spots Pierrot coming out of the school with his friends, watches him go up the steps to talk to him, and then observes as they go down the steps and talk together for some time; Majid's son soon goes one way, with Pierrot returning to his friends and then walking off the other way. Have Majid's son and Pierrot been making the tapes all along? Or did Majid's son only involve Pierrot at a later time in his campaign? Or is Pierrot the organizer? In the visual and emotional terms of cinema, the shot suggests that our empathetic focus on the protagonist, Georges, has been misplaced all along. Politically, the shot suggests that we must consider the margins, not just the bourgeois centre of things.

This vicious cycle of twisted patrilineal vengeance—did Majid's son indirectly kill his own father to drive home Georges' guilt?—is all the more pointed because of its echoing of the “war on terror” going on at the time, centred on Iraq, that favourite target of the George Bushes, father and son.¹³ As Georges and Anne worry about Pierrot's whereabouts, the TV news between them flashes pictures of hostages or the dead in what seems to be Iraq, images of violence in the Mideast, and a politician's statement about recent problems in India. Majid's suicide is reminiscent not only of the unnecessary killing of the rooster (the national symbol of France), whose head he cut off as a boy at Georges' behest so that George could turn the incident into a tale of Majid threatening him, but a sort of inversion of the hostage-killing videos from Iraq shown on the Internet and on news channels; the surveillance tapes are an inversion of supposedly middle- and upper-class protecting surveillance systems in the West (e.g. England's extensive CCTV network). Anne and Georges blow up the supposed threat to his family—which are only provocative reminders of his guilt—into a campaign of terror: Anne talks of “being terrorized by anonymous calls and those fucking videos!” (we only see her receive one phone call, in which the person merely asks to speak to Georges Laurent); Georges, in his angry first visit to Majid, asks, “Who's been terrorizing my family?”; Georges later defends himself, saying, “My visit was the consequence of his campaign of terror”; Georges tells Majid's son, “I'd advise you to desist from terrorizing us with those stupid tapes,” and then rephrases, “You terrorize my family and me with your damn tapes!” In their argument, Georges tells Anne, “You realize you're doing exactly what he wants,” echoing the post-September 11 credo of not living in fear, etc., since to do so would mean “letting the terrorists win.” *Caché* implies, then, that past colonialism to enrich, and present pre-emptive strikes to protect, white bourgeois privilege are behind the “war on terror” that is blamed on “Others” who supposedly resent the power and wealth that we, in fact, stripped them of the chance to have long ago.

The complex political dynamic at the heart of *Caché*'s mystery, then, revolves around the upper-middle-class world which Georges and Anne inhabit and to which, to varying degrees, *Caché*'s audience subscribes (whether they aspire to it or inhabit a similar world themselves). For all of Georges' supposed intelligence, a trait that he trades on as a literature-pundit on public television and a quality that, according to bourgeois empathy rhetoric, makes him more moral and likeable—recall critics' condemnations of Bruno in *L'Enfant*—he never figures

out (nor do we) who is sending the tapes, is called an idiot by his own wife, and comes off as blustery, irrational, and odious in front of Majid and Majid's son. In fact, Majid not only sees right through him, but recognizes the pathetic frailty of his position: “Kicking my ass won't leave you any wiser about me. Even if you beat me to death. But you're too refined for that. Above all, you have too much to lose.” The real trick, and truth, of *Caché* lies here: in getting us to not only empathize with Georges, but presume his bourgeois family's innocence and vulnerability from the start, we are complicit in demonizing Majid and his son (the “objective” camera's shots of the father and son in silhouette against the bars of the police van only play into our willingness to see them as the villains). Our will to empathy prevents us from recognizing the person who's truly been demonized, scarred, and unjustly treated—Majid.

The title of the film itself hides the truth by obliquely referring to all that George has to lose (power, wealth, cultural capital, intellectual respectability, status, privilege): “cache” means “hidden” in French but is a homonym, in English, for “cachet,” or prestige, and is spelled the same as “cache,” a hiding place and also a term referring to computer memory, thus linking the suppressed memories that surface in Georges' dreams with the technology of DVDs, which stores images that can be quickly retrieved, scanned, rewound, etc. And Haneke's playing with subjective and objective POV shots not only puts us in the position of voyeurs of Georges' life, but holds up a metafilmic mirror to our own. How much are we, as bourgeois viewers whose will to empathy has been turned back on us, willing to lose if we are stared down by the Other and confronted with our complicity in their subjugation?

Haneke's confrontation of the viewer hits too close to home for some critics, who resentfully see Haneke's target of them and their bourgeois world as the true threat. Peter Rainer, in a “B+” review in *The Christian Science Monitor*, revolts against the supposed malice of the director's outlook in an increasingly defensive piece, writing that “in many ways [Haneke's films] are repellent and borderline cruel” and that characters “always come across as pawns in his chess game . . . there is an undeniable narrowness to Haneke's world view. Why, after all, should the bourgeoisie be almost exclusively blameworthy?” Rather than consider the answer, Rainer concludes, “Haneke has always had it in for the middle class,” and that, though a paragraph earlier he notes that, in *Caché*, at least the characters have a “political justification,” he now sees that Haneke's personal “hatred is trussed up as a political statement” in the film. Andrew Sarris, in a quote from his *New York Observer* review cited on the Rotten Tomatoes website, states that “Too much of the plot's machinery turns out to be a metaphorical mechanism by which to pin the tail of colonial guilt on Georges and the rest of us smug bourgeois donkeys.” Armond White's *New York Press* review is rather more convoluted and at times seems a wilfully naïve misreading (not to mention intent on upholding Spielberg's *Munich* as a far superior film); he argues that Haneke's film “pander[s] to the public's guilt and fears,” that “mere recognition of the West's guilt” should not be considered “tantamount to intellectual and moral progress,” and that the film itself is not only “conveniently ‘remorseful,’” but “cannily customized for the empowered middle-class,” rather than aimed for and then at them. White resorts to the Aristotelian origins of bourgeois empathy—“Haneke is unconcerned with

insurrection or catharsis"—and sees the film as bolstering "the white bourgeoisie's sense of being besieged," rather than a Trojan horse which is built out of white bourgeois empathy and guilt in order to attack it. White misunderstands Haneke's "calm, Kubrick-precise camera placement" as meant to "disrupt the well-heeled couple's placidity," rather than the viewer's, and then himself dismisses Majid and his son as "token" characters who are "boogey men" meant to "prod George [sic] and Anne's insularity," rather than ours; Georges' and our demonization of the underprivileged Other should force us into a closer examination of ourselves and our system of privilege.

The interview with Michael Haneke on the DVD of *Caché* is itself revealing; the unidentified interviewer asks questions about the elements of the story that have to do with Georges and Annes, as if it is a film about their personal drama, not a film with a larger political point. Haneke still often hints at a larger framework, though, noting that his film is posing the question, "What did we suppress in order to arrive where we are?" He notes that he purposefully leaves the mystery unanswered "so that the viewer can't say, 'Yeah, but [the videotaper] also did' [or] 'He's not without his own faults, either' and therefore better understand [rationalize] Georges' actions. No." Haneke notes the responsibility of the viewer as a sort of witness:

It's up to the viewer not to choose among the possibilities, but to realize that there are many possibilities. . . . A lot of people who go to the cinema don't want this sort of thing. This can be a problem for those educated in mainstream cinema, and who want some guarantee that, at the end of the film, they can leave and forget what they have seen.

Caché uses the genre of the mystery-thriller to lure us into trying to solve the casual bourgeois game of the plot—allowing us to analyze, ascertain, figure out, solve, categorize, and incriminate a villainous Other at a safe remove—but the shift from objective to subjective camera positions, in tandem with the reversal of empathy concerning Georges, force us beyond the position of eyewitnesses to the precipice of participation. We become involved; witnesses, after all, must interpret and often try to cope with what they see. The film's appeals to empathy are the mystery's true red herrings, with even the characters exhorting each other to see reality from their harried, panicky perspective; when Anne is arguing with Georges, she tells him, "Imagine the shoe's on the other foot," while Georges retorts, "If you could hear yourself!" We realize we are like Anne and Georges when we are searching for clues in the tapes or on screen; by watching with them, we become complicit with them, to the point where many viewers even resist condemning Georges and still want a simple, demonizing solution—Majid or his son sent the tapes. "You haven't changed," Majid tells Georges, but we must, as responsible, witnessing viewers. As with Olivier in *Le Fils*—Luc Dardenne notes that "Olivier realizes that he was almost caught in a repetition. For us the film is about how to get out of this repetition" (West 15)—we must break the violent bourgeois loop of guilt, displacement, demonization, and self-justification. Yet an honest, clear-eyed viewer should move beyond voyeurism to witnessing, and these events on screen should bring self-reflection: Why did we wish to see "reality" from Anne's and Georges' perspective for

so long? Why didn't our allegiances shift or even disappear when we saw Majid crying, or when he cut his own throat? Why do we go along with Georges' bourgeois concern with legal guilt as imposed by the privilege-protecting establishment, and not concentrate on Georges' emotional and ethical guilt, which is what matters, as Haneke himself points out? Why do we wish to know for certain who sent the tapes, perhaps even searching for someone to pin down and blame after the film has ended, misdirecting our outrage? Why do we want to know what Pierrot and Majid's son are saying to each other? Or do we even instinctively wish to empathize—or shut off our will to empathize—with the Dardenne's protagonists and with Georges precisely in order to enter—or numb ourselves to—a paralyzing cycle of complicity? Haneke's film reveals, in its implication of the white bourgeois-empathetic viewer, that the blindnesses, faults, and threats lie within the Self, not the Other; the Other, like Majid or his son, is just a displacement of the problems within the bourgeois Self, as epitomized by Georges. It does not matter if we don't see Majid's son and Pierrot meet at the end, for it is precisely the desire to blame, to compartmentalize, to demonize and displace, which must be delayed, even avoided. If Majid's son and Pierrot are the culprits, their collusion only suggests that any simple-minded, violent reprisal for past bourgeois violence against the Other is bound to repeat and feed into a violent cycle of empathy-led displacement, guilt, and judgment.

With *Le Fils* and *L'Enfant*, and with *Caché*, the Dardenne brothers and Haneke suggest a way out of the trap of the bourgeois viewer's sympathy- and empathy-led consolidation of privilege, offering both self-criticism and a chance to "extend the unique energy of one's desires and experiences into an active engagement with the world" (Morgan 534). If, as Kleinman notes, "the mediatization of violence and suffering creates a form of inauthentic social experience: witnessing at a distance, a kind of voyeurism in which nothing is acutely at stake for the observer," a cinema in which "We are outside the field of responsibility; we need feel nothing, risk nothing, lose nothing . . . We consume images for the trauma they represent, the pain they hold (and give?)" (232), the Dardenne and Haneke turn the gaze into an act of witnessing with renewed political force. They attempt to break down this distance, to confront their audience with their complicity, to revolt against viewer expectations, and to avoid the comfortable resolution of redemption, but in a way that offers a chance for the viewer to take another look at themselves by seeing film differently. Lauren Berlant argues, in talking about the "normativity hang-over" after watching the Dardenne's films, that the characters' quest for inclusion in a respectable work world is about trying "to make reliable a feeling of belonging" and that the children Igor's, Rosetta's, Francis' and Bruno's deeply ambiguous gestures towards some sort of reciprocity, connection, or mutual acknowledgement break down any easy binaries of us vs. them or empathizing audience vs. pitiful victim. Just because the Dardenne—and Haneke—avoid redemptive humanist endings, then, doesn't mean they aren't suggesting a different sense of hope or optimism.

In departing from the diegetic effect—especially through extremely mobile camerawork and unstable POVs—the Dardenne and Haneke no longer make it "possible to witness suffering without experiencing that conflict with one's sense of

responsibility that overcomes" one (Tan 241). "Resisting the diegetic effect means depriving oneself of the gratification of all the concerns that can be realized by films" (249), concerns that are typically bourgeois power-endorsing. These films are, in their violent, revolting use of the camera, turning on the bourgeois gazer and demanding that they take the first step in political resistance—looking within. These are not films that are projecting the "self onto the other" but films that are disturbingly destabilizing "the boundaries of the self" by attacking cinema's endorsement of "liberal empathy, which, like liberal guilt, is generally superficial, and ineffectual . . . [it] never really considers the standpoint of the other or acknowledges different experiences because it never questions its own assumptions or prejudices or the importance of larger social forces and structures of power" (Siomopoulos 15). As Siomopoulos points out, Hannah Arendt argued that compassion is a poor basis for social justice because it relies solely on "redistribution of both sympathy and resources," rather than "active public discussion . . . Discourses of compassion make deliberation impossible because they collapse the difference between sufferer and audience, other and self, and thus make dialogue seem unnecessary" (18-19). In starkly confronting the viewer with the difference between Self and Other, in erasing the viewer's will to empathy and sympathy, and in turning the gaze on those who are looking at the screen, answering Kiarostami's call to implicate the audience, the Dardenne brothers and Michael Haneke are pointing the way towards an inner revolt, and hopefully a growing public dialogue, about the violent, limited, imperial outlook of bourgeois empathy.¹⁴

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NOTES

- 1 Examples are too numerous to mention, but some of the most obvious Hollywood films in recent years to showcase the material trappings of a white bourgeois world are *Panic Room*, *Something's Gotta Give* and *Spanglish*.
- 2 In "art cinema" there is, of course, a long tradition of challenging bourgeois audience expectations, particularly in Europe—see, for instance, von Trier's work and Lukas Moodysson's last two films, *A Hole in My Heart* and *Container*. The Dardenne brothers' and Haneke's *Caché*, however, come from the vein of docudrama, whereby a concentrated, intently staring documentary sensibility is fused with a basic dramatic narrative; Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* is an excellent early example of this kind of film.
- 3 A recent metafilmic movie that is conventionally voyeuristic is *Click*, where Adam Sandler finds himself in possession of a remote control that allows him, for instance, to fast-forward through foreplay with his wife or look at a passing jogger's breasts in slow-motion.
- 4 The distinction between sympathy and empathy is worth considering for this essay, where few viewers would be able to empathize with Rosetta, Olivier, or Bruno, as they are all part of an underclass or lower class (and, in Olivier's case, feels grief about a very particular, unusual death), but most would be able to empathize with Anne and Georges in *Caché*, as they are of their class. Yet Neill fails to take into account the tremendous importance of both viewers' and characters' socio-political positions, preferring to stick too closely to the aesthetic, Platonic notion of catharsis (pity and fear); he also seems to assume that sympathy and empathy cannot be mixed. The essay offers an unduly optimistic, Enlightenment view of empathy as necessarily part of the "education of emotion" (250), as though emotion should be harnessed and taught in some sort of logical manner. The thrust of Neill's essay, then, is that empathy is good and leads to understanding, yet he ignores the possibility that we use empathy as an egotistical leap—a means of displacing, justifying, excusing, validating, and/or prioritizing our own experiences, status, and actions while pitying or fearing for the Other. It is noteworthy that Neill focuses more on what empathy can supposedly teach us about the Other than about the Self in his concluding sec-

tion (257-58). For more on empathy and sympathy in film-watching, see Berys Gaut's "Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film" and Deborah Knight's "In Fictional Shoes: Mental Simulation and Fiction," in Carroll's and Choi's 2006 collection, *Philosophy of Film and Pictures: An Anthology*.

- There have also been scientific efforts to better understand viewers' empathy; see, for instance, Tan's book and the many scientific papers listed within or Ron Tamborini's, Kristen Salomonson's, and Changmo Bahk's paper "The Relationship of Empathy to Comforting Behavior Following Film Exposure," *Communication Research* 20.5 (October 1993): 723-38.
- 5 Other drama filmmakers are challenging viewers' expectations with handheld, oblique-angled camerawork, most notably American director Lodge Kerrigan's recent film *Keane*, about a mentally disturbed man preoccupied with getting custody of his daughter. The title character is as capable of beating up a stranger while in a cocaine-induced paranoid state as he is of babysitting a motel neighbour's daughter while she is gone for a night, defying easy assumptions about mental illness, particularly in relation to the safety of children—the bourgeois viewer, conditioned by sensational media reports on pedophilia and kidnapping, constantly worries that Keane will molest or otherwise harm the girl. Paul Greengrass' *United 93*, another of his docudrama recreations of historical events, offers no protagonists but only mass confusion and chaos on both sides in the doomed flight, thus undercutting the desire to demonize the hijackers.
 - 6 Indeed, in the brothers' interview with Joan M. and David West, Jean-Pierre Dardenne notes that their filming of Olivier from behind may make the viewer, "when you see a face . . . really look at it—more than you would if you had been looking at it all the time," while Luc Dardenne suggests that the camera's view suggests Olivier's as-yet-unexposed burden: "observing him from behind we see something private and peculiar to him" (17).
 - 7 Luc Dardenne refuses to clarify the ending while noting that it is about absence: "the greatest lesson Olivier gives the teenager is not killing him. . . . Perhaps this is the reason why Francis approaches Olivier at the end, because Olivier does not kill him" (15).
 - 8 There is, though, a short scene where Bruno goes to his mother's house to ensure she'll provide an alibi for him, and we see that she seems to be in an abusive relationship; it is implied that Bruno grew up in a broken home.
 - 9 It should be noted that most of the harsh reviews which I cite do offer one legitimate caveat—Jimmy's near-silence throughout undercuts *L'Enfant's* realism. His quietness does, however, accentuate his objectification by Bruno and us, the bourgeois audience—we come to see Jimmy as a thing.
 - 10 van Hoeij may be offering his own translation of the French. In the version I saw, the subtitles translated Bruno's words as: "What did I do? I thought we'd have another."
 - 11 It is interesting that reviewers wish to see the final scene as a moral moment of redemption, rather than the culmination of Bruno's political acts of responsibility: he admits to the theft, likely clearing Steve's name, he goes to prison, he seems to be slowly accepting his fatherhood, and he may be suggesting, in part, how sorry he is for what he did to Sonia (selling the baby and now being away from her and Jimmy) when he weeps and clings to her hands.
 - 12 Haneke's *Code Inconnu* (*Code Unknown*) also features a couple named Anne and Georges and its crucial opening scene involves an act of witnessing, wherein Amadou appeals to other pedestrians around him for eyewitness corroborations of his attempt to get Jean, Georges' younger brother, to apologize to a woman panhandling on the street. Some of the actors who plays Anne's and Georges' friends at their dinner party in *Caché* also appear at a dinner in a fancy restaurant in *Code Inconnu*. From one film to the other, then, Haneke's repetitive casting and naming suggest the ruts and routines of bourgeois life.
 - 13 The film is clearly an indictment of patriarchy, too, which can neither be unravelled from white bourgeois hegemony nor resolved by the next generation. Georges, who takes the protect-the-family mentality of the patriarch to a murderous extreme in order to cover up his guilt, is reflected in his son, according to Anne, who says Pierrot, like his father, "can be a macho little prick." If Majid's son is making the tapes without Majid's knowledge, then the son has killed his father while trying to avenge and prove Georges' betrayal of Majid, while Pierrot's possible involvement in the video-tapings suggests that he, too, could only break from the repressed crimes of his father by committing his own crimes in response. In fact, the next generation, shown in that final shot of the school emptying, may be more dangerous because of their naive assumption that they can break their parents' patterns or ignore, and so avoid, the past.
 - 14 This is not merely an idealistic sentiment; *Rosetta* precipitated a debate in Belgium about the employment of young people; the "Rosetta Plan" was proposed by the Minister of Employment in 1999 and put into law not long after, ensuring that businesses with more than 50 workers hire "young [particularly twenty-five and under], low-skilled workers" to make up at least 3% of their labour force (Morgan 534).

Excesses of Millennial Capitalism, Excesses of Violence

SEVERAL CRITICAL FRAGMENTS REGARDING THE CINEMA OF MICHAEL HANEKE

BY KEVIN WYNTER

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use
The difference between poetry and rhetoric
My power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold...

—Audre Lourde, *Power*

Exegetical Method and Polemic on Millennial Capitalism

A point of illumination on the process of critical thinking and writing one would be hard pressed to dispute is that it is ineluctably a reflection of the moment in which it is produced. A critic/writer can be no more, to greater or lesser extents, than the sum of, among other things, his ever-shifting politics, personal history, image-repertoire and ethical values. All or some of these characteristics may be masked or exposed to varying degrees when the moment necessitates (the effort to appear 'totally objective' – an oxymoron, really – being one), but the fact remains that critical practice is forever braided to the threads of the critic's, for lack of a better word, '*personality*.' Likewise, one might extend this rather elementary insight to artists of any and all rank. In fact, for an artist to practice his craft devoid of personal investment is to merely give motion to the gestures of the craft and, in turn, reject the conduct of art. It should follow, then, that the skillful articulation of an artist's innermost obsessions



The Seventh Continent: the bourgeois family approaches its end

and concerns stands certainly, for the critic, as a principle criteria of assessment. The obvious question that arises here is, how are we to discern in the work of art what does and does not belong to the 'personality' of the artist? In other words, what in a given work is of value and what are we to ignore or discard?

Assessing the work of the critic should, in theory, be a less foggy enterprise than assessing the work of the artist, as it is the duty of the critic to openly make intellectual judgments that are both objectively critical and personally informed, and to do so with as little obfuscation as possible. It is the 'personality' of the critic that is his greatest asset. Contrarily, the artist, particularly filmmakers, given the broad division of labour involved in the production of a film, need not make any such commitment to personal revelation to perform his craft successfully; for example, I find Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* (2002) to be exemplary of the American action genre and a fine piece of entertainment, but I cannot say it reveals anything to me about Raimi personally or politically, or about the regrettable socio-economic conditions coterminous with its production and historical moment, or that any of his films dating back to *The Evil Dead* (1981) reflect any differently.

Increasingly, it appears that fewer American filmmakers are willing to express even the faintest tremor of a reactionary political stance (save the distorted historiographies of Stone and the gross 'aestheticizations' of Spielberg) against their country's dreadful contemporary predicament(s) or to commit themselves to an ideological project, opting all too often to play an automaton in the great assembly line of the Hollywood machine (a mournful thought given America's current political climate and the imperialist doctrines of the George W. Bush administration). However, the foreign counterparts to these trite American filmmakers have time and again demonstrated a stronger predilection toward a personal/political/philosophical project and a commitment to the consistency of its expression, being invariably more innovative narratively and formally than the better portion of contemporary American cinema. It is not my place at the moment to speculate on the intricacies of this dissymmetry, but suffice it to say that foreign narrative cinema of the last decade (if not longer) has been disproportionately more stimulating and intellectually more in tune with the myriad crises (globalization, ecological destruction and mass-scale poverty are just a few) facing mankind in the crepuscular dawn of the 21st century than Hollywood has dared to. At this point reiterating the role played by the critic's 'personality' becomes significant because it is with much personal interest and to the best of my critical acumen that I forthrightly acknowledge Michael Haneke as the most important filmmaker working in contemporary world cinema. It is the total sum of the constituents making up my 'personality' and the specificity of the cultural moment I am writing in as *I experience it* that informs this pronouncement as much as it is an objective and empirical appreciation of Haneke's body of work thus far. This may seem to the reader so directly a point of fact of the critical process as to question the purpose of articulating it at all, but the experience of this revelation for me was strong enough to warrant a full-scale reinterpretation of my research on Haneke's cinema which, after vacillating between several different theoretical frameworks and attempting to decide on the most productive model to move forward with, I directed a simple question toward myself: *what is it about Haneke's films*

*that reverberate so strongly with me at this point in time?*ⁱ

I posed this question to myself while sitting in a designer coffee shop in the heart of the city in which I reside (Toronto) and the experience of what followed can be likened to the moment from John Carpenter's much underrated film *They Live* (1988) when the protagonist unwittingly dons a pair of extra-terrestrial sunglasses that permit him to see the material world for what it really is: a procession of subliminal messages orchestrated by alien illuminati (in control of media and financial institutions) disguised as human beings demanding the city's inhabitants to "Obey" and "Conform" through masked consumerist-ideological communication.

I was overwhelmed by a kind of "nausea" Sartre would have appreciated. Through the coffee shop window everything began taking on a certain sense of symbolic putrefaction: rivers of disconnected people on either side of the street painstakingly ignoring one another while side-stepping social castoffs begging for change at the foot of ubiquitous window-displays selling anything whatsoever. Adorning the top of every building in site were billboards of Stalinist proportion wallpapering the skyline with shoes I should be wearing, beer I should be drinking and generic images of hetero-normative lifestyles to which I avoid acculturating myself at the peril of social ostracization. I found myself coming to grips with the dizzying reality of living in a spectacle where intersubjective connection between individuals is comparatively inconsequential to the myriad enticements on offer vying for consumer attention. After all, why bother making any effort at human contact or intersubjective relations when there are incalculable vectors of televisual communication and an elaborate system of objects to keep us company?

The answer to my question became clear: the uncanny familiarity of the disaffected people at whom I found myself gazing on the street who, like myself, have had their minds colonized by a consumer based media from birth are a direct correlate of the disaffected figures in Haneke's films. Moreover, it is the idiosyncrasies of Haneke's cinema with its sparing precision, decentered compositions, abstinence from the emotive manipulations of non-diegetic music and his general avoidance of extraneous formal methods of articulating recurring themes and motifs that are chiefly responsible for the indelible impressions they have left on me. More importantly, or at least of equal importance, it is the way that Haneke's cinema brings the spectacle of millennial capitalism and its symptoms of social disconnection, televisual image saturation and currency fetishism to its extreme, though I would argue logically violent conclusion that speaks to the "destruction within me."

This sense of "destruction," a word I find suitable for describing my visceral response to the experience of living in an ever-accelerating commodity culture, is the corollary of participating in a hyper-capitalist system that, at 'best,' sufficiently masks its ideological tyranny so that one is unaware of its persuasions (*They Live*), and at worst metabolizes any reactionary response to the system through assimilation, so in turn transmogrifying *reaction to the system into complicity with the system* (is there anything more obscene than the gross commodification of Che Guevara's image?) The impulse I derive from this feeling, as a sensitive thinker, demands that I reject the non-committal path of discursive dialecticism and 'objective' academic fence walking and give to an analysis of Haneke what

Haneke gives to the spectators of his films: a polemical stance on a contemporary predicament coloured by 'personality.'

Karl Marx has famously remarked that we should conceive of capitalism, perforce, as mankind's greatest achievement and equally its most regrettable. Postmodern theorist *par excellence*, Frederic Jameson agrees with Marx's position as evidenced in the following quote: "the lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together."² For the sake of clarity I wish to reiterate my lack of interest in participating in this tradition of dialectical thinking, opting rather to think through the "catastrophe" side of things polemically. Thinking of capitalism as catastrophe and progress all together, if it is difficult to register intellectually, I do believe is implicitly felt by all entrenched within the system more or less and to one degree or another. For this reason I disagree that the taking of moral positions represents maneuvering into a more "comfortable stance." I see the opposite as the case. Intellectualizing the moral, ethical, ecological and social enslavement of the planet by a sociopolitical and economic model whose global expansion and systemic acceleration are unprecedented (but not just expansion, the veiled way this model has been implemented around the world) into an "austere" dialectic, or to watch our intelligensia coolly trade theoretical propositions and quibble over semantic distinctions or discursive models among one another does no justice to the visceral, psychic and psychological dilemma of the contemporary human condition (regardless of time and place, your situation is a product or by-product of the American capitalist economic model, or in the process of becoming so). This is not to say that the fruits of our intellectuals should be rejected. The point is that the so-called moralist, if he may truly call himself such, acknowledges the inherent contradiction of his situation and in fact makes it the focus of his revulsion and critique. The very fact that the moralist is "so deeply infused and infected" and sees no escape from the cultural gridlock of American economic and military ideology or its 'democratic' geo-political model is not a critical failing on his part (or "inveterate and all too human" – as if we could be anything except human), but the fundamental nature of his position.

Appertaining to the cinema of Michael Haneke, I will concern myself specifically with instances of suicide (as an act and gesture) in his films and the climate surrounding these acts, as well as the kinds of responses they give rise to as, aforementioned, a corollary of millennial capitalist life. More importantly, along with an interpretation of the representations of violence in suicide, I would like to provide some general observations where capital and violence may be linked and offer some questions regarding Haneke's cinema that may potentially open up a discursive space for readers. My analysis presumes in the reader a certain amount of familiarity with Haneke's narratives so as to eschew recapitulation where possible.

Ultimately, as I have laid bare my polemical intentions in castigating (in ways both skewed and surely inadequate) the ideologies subtending millennial capitalism, I hope to locate for myself the difference between the conduct of critical practice and the practice of critical power.

The Final Solution:

Suicidal Gestures in the New Millennium

The Seventh Continent

It has been said, from Simmel to Benjamin and onward, that *distraction* is invariably one of the fundamental experiences of the contemporary first-world individual: distraction by way of media and advertising, the organization of urban space, the contents of popular culture, flows of capital and its systemic control. If this proposition is indeed tenable, then the logical question becomes, *what, exactly, are we being distracted from?*

In line with Nietzsche, who famously proclaimed, "*if you gaze for long into an abyss, eventually the abyss gazes into you,*" I would like to offer a general hypothesis: images formed by and directed at the popular imagination are fundamentally predicated on distraction. In fact, distraction, understood equally as the great ideological magic show of capital (arranged for the masses) and as one of the defining experiences of the contemporary first-world individual, stands principally, though mostly undetected and without clear intuition, as the socially unifying feature of visual culture. The logic of capital and consumerism uses distraction to promote morbid narcissism and self-absorption through the proliferation of idealized images depicting body types representative of only a fraction of society toward whom the general population must enviously strive (Yet this, contradictorily, under demands from the same system that we consume processed and "fast" foods rapaciously); it makes us question our personal worth in the context of economic success; it treats aging like a terrific disease that must be avoided at all costs rather than embracing biological (and ecological) life-cycles; it attempts to mask the natural order of things with the zeitgeist's 'ideal'; it manipulates and intimidates the masses with fear and apocalyptic visions of the future, and so pushing us to prepare for disaster through the accumulation of wealth and objects so that the system, mystifyingly, may remain operational even if its architects vanish. The distractions of visual culture are ordered in such a way that the majority may trudge along intellectually malnourished (and without discontent) off the surfeit of vacuous images constituting popular visual discourse, while the minority, aware of the machinations of millennial capitalism are left with few viable alternatives – this is the abyssal heart of capital. In *The Seventh Continent* (1989) the most radical (or logical, depending on your position) of potential alternatives is realized.

Haneke's first feature film dramatizes the erosion of one family's integration with the socio-symbolic network of capital. The family elects to destroy and liquidate their possessions, divorce themselves from their everyday commitments and carry out a suicide pact, though no specific reasoning is ever provided aside from a cryptic letter from the patriarch of the family (Georg) reassuring his mother of the certainty of his decision. As a knee-jerk critical response, one might be tempted to interpret the suicide pact as an emancipatory gesture or a politically infected statement against the dire cultural predicament of millennial capitalism, but to do so is to miss the point. Here there is no premeditated political statement or emancipatory reflex, even as they proceed with their deaths they do so 'systematically' as they have lived their lives day after day and year after year. The gesture is without spontaneity or affect, or at least

the scenes on offer to the spectator seem to suggest as much.

The film takes place over a three-year period and in that time we are never provided with expository sequences or events illuminating the nature of the family's Thanatopic desire. Haneke offers nothing more than a series of perfunctory rituals acted out over the course of daily living: Georg and Anna wake up every morning at 6am, Anna wakes her daughter, Georg ties his shoes on the edge of the bath tub, the family sits at the breakfast table encircling copious amounts of food with scarcely a word spoken between them, the family car is driven from the garage and the daughter is dropped off at school, then Georg and Anna go to work, etc. Haneke's reliance on harsh lighting and his staunch use of static shots situating objects in the center of the frame and characters at the periphery reinforces this lack of affect in the family's behavior and the primacy of the *system of objects* at a formal level. When the suicidal gesture is finally enacted, it is carried out dutifully and with minimal feeling.

Ultimately, the question that remains is, why suicide? Somewhere over the three-year period Georg and Anna are struck by an immense dissatisfaction with their lives, they realize something must be done and being removed from the situation appears to them to be the logical option. Is this because millennial capitalism leaves no viable alternative space in which to exist free from the persuasions of the system? As if once one has been integrated into the machine-like operations and efficiencies of the capitalist economic model, removing one's self becomes impossible at any level, as every facet of our society is predicated on individual earning power. The point I wish to make is this: *distraction* is the second Janus face of capital. To live in the First World at the turn of the millennium and not accept distraction as a fundamental component toward maintaining the human psyche, it seems to me, is to consciously decide to look directly into the "abyss" of personal and collective existence where capitalist ideology reigns supreme. This is a staring match we avoid instinctively as a survival mechanism. For most of us, accepting distraction as a contingency of capitalist living is the going rate for maintaining sanity under increasingly insane circumstances. But what happens when distraction is no longer a viable option? This is the context in which we are to understand the suicides of *The Seventh Continent*, which, secondarily, stands as a symbolic repudiation against the hegemony of capitalism.

The language of capital speaks a discourse of annihilation. Henri Lefebvre says as much when stating, "capital [is defined] by its conflicting dualities of production and destruction, with increasing priority for the destructive capacity that comes at its peak and is raised to a world scale."³ The death of the nuclear family in *The Seventh Continent* represents, with calculated precision and in an apparently logical turn, the capitalist model in its frenzied state of production at the expense of human life and its lived dimension. Not even the planet's seventh and last continent, illustrated as a vacation getaway on a billboard outside a car wash, provides a viable, alternative space, or a final potential distraction. And so the image of the ad for Australia is reified from the imaginary of the family in their suicidal gesture, but at one and the same time remains duplicitous as the representation of an alternative space and the potentiality of a transcendental utopia, for ultimately, there is none; after all, it is nothing more than an advertisement.

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance

Here there are two suicides, the first informs the second. In its first instance, the suicidal gesture is neither seen nor contextualized. What we see is a commotion in the hallway of a college dormitory with one of the film's recurring characters (Maximillian B.) returning to his room to gain a better view of the corpse of a student who has leapt from a window. In the following scene, or "fragment," as it were, Maximillian B. walks outside of his dormitory and passes by the jumper's chalk outline. The death is never again referred to or spoken about in the narrative. The film's second suicidal gesture comes much later in the film from Maximillian B. himself after a series of aleatory circumstances cause him to 'snap,' leading him to (re)enter a bank, killing several patrons by wildly firing a handgun without prejudice. Subsequently, Maximillian B. returns to his vehicle and kills himself with a single shot from the same pistol.

What is significant about the suicidal gesture here is not the gesture itself, but its inscription into televisual discourse, the apparatus *par excellence* of social distraction. The shootings in the bank and Maximillian B.'s subsequent suicide are melded into the arbitrary flow of televisual information where vapid celebrity news, foreign wars, local killings and commercials are intertwined, sharing the same undifferentiated symbolic space. Maximillian B.'s 'snapping' is germinated from a financial complication at a gas station that he attempts to reconcile at a nearby bank and the fact that capital and the exchange of currency underscores the murders he commits and his suicide is not without significance.

The fragment following the suicide of Maximillian B. depicts a portion of a victim's upper torso from the bank shooting in close-up as blood runs from the lifeless body onto the floor of an institution designated to facilitate the exchange of capital: this, for me, tells us everything we need to know about the losses of life concluding the film.

Caché

In *Caché* (2005) the suicidal gesture results from an enigma. Georg believes that a series of mysterious videotapes being delivered to his home originate from a childhood transgression against another child whom his parents had assumed guardianship over. The nature of the transgression resides in Georg fabricating instructions from his parents that Majid decapitate one of the family roosters. After Majid beheads the rooster, being spattered with a spurt of blood across the cheek in the process, Georg's parents arrange for Majid to be moved into foster care.

Presumably having not seen or spoken to each other since childhood, Georg confronts Majid about the videotapes of static surveillance shots outside his home. The videotapes are delivered wrapped in child-like drawings of a decapitated rooster with garish spurts of blood erupting from its neck. The repressed tension between Georg and Majid reemerges after Majid denies knowledge of the videotapes, ostensibly corroborated by a subsequent videotape showing Majid crying in solitude at his kitchen table moments after meeting with Georg, seemingly oblivious to being recorded. The enigmatic dimension of the videotapes and drawings is allowed to persist.

Not long after, Majid asks Georg to return to his flat, the latter unaware that he is being summoned so that he may be present for Majid's suicide, which, incidentally, is also recorded.



Caché: disintegration of a marriage (Daniel Auteuil, Juliette Binoche)

What is of significance here is the way in which Majid takes his life: removing a barber's razor from his pocket, Majid slashes his neck casting a spurt of blood against the wall, similar to the spurt of blood from the rooster's neck across his cheek as a child, sending his lifeless body crashing to the floor. Here the suicidal gesture and its obvious analogous link to the cutting of the rooster's neck (and the drawings that depict it) asserts itself; its original traumatic dimension as *'le point de captation'* of Majid's childhood, a nodal point of anxiety and repression resurfacing at a time when Majid is ill-equipped to psychologically deal with the repercussions. What Majid's crisis bares witness to is the return of a repressed trauma and an unwillingness to locate and rely upon 'coping mechanisms' to disavow the "Real" character of the traumatic break in order to maintain coherency in his symbolic life.

Majid's suicide, though ostensibly an instance of one individual's existential disaffection and unwillingness to bare the

burden of his defining trauma, carries with it the specter of capital; in particular, its social stratifications and classicism. Majid's gesture, like the suicide pact of the family from *The Seventh Continent*, is a disaffected, premeditated decision; he waits for Georg to arrive before telling him, "I thought you should be here to see this," and apathetically carrying out the act. Like *The Seventh Continent*, the suicidal gesture is not merely removal from an existential predicament, but the enactment of an ethically inflected statement.

Georg's spectatorial position as a child watching Majid cut the neck of the rooster is reenacted through Georg's presence at Majid's suicide with the recording of the event providing several added layers of complexity (is Majid aware of the moment being captured? If not, was the person responsible for recording the room aware of Majid's intentions and looking to assign some level of culpability to Georg avoided by him in childhood? At the meta-filmic level, how does Georg's complicated



Caché: race, tension and hysteria

position as a spectator of violence relate to the position of the non-diegetic viewer?) When Majid's son eventually confronts Georg about the death of his father, he indicates the repercussions Georg's actions had on his father's upbringing and how being relegated to a lower social position prohibited Majid from receiving opportunities to attain the things accorded to a higher social standing enjoyed by Georg. Here the gap that separates Majid and Georg is rendered explicit. Georg's jealousy and selfishness as a child is directly correlated to the lost privilege of good education and the attendant influences of the upper class. Thus, Majid's son regrettably reduces his father's trauma to the level of class frustration and the lost opportunity of fuller integration into the socio-symbolic network of capital. This, as I see it, is the most alarming aspect of the film, much more so than ascertaining the true identity of the videographer authoring the mysterious tapes.

Time of the Wolf

The Christian sacrificial gesture *par excellence* resides in Jesus Christ's acceptance of the necessity of his death by crucifixion to absolve humanity of its sins. In *Time of the Wolf* (2003),

the unfulfilled suicidal gesture is the symbolic mirror of the Christian sacrificial gesture. The "time of the wolf" is a time when social relations and the capitalist system have broken down due to an unspecified urban catastrophe causing citizens to take to the periphery of the urban core. The periphery is a space where the cash flow of capital is ineffectual and bartering has become the only means of acquiring sustenance. There are two points of interest here regarding capitalism: the speed with which people acclimate themselves to a new economy and system of exchange, and the reverberating echo of capital present in the 'post-catastrophe' system insofar as objects retain a sense of value in the fact that they are excepted in exchanges in direct correlation to desire.

How are we to read the suicidal gesture of the child who attempts to self-immolate? Is it a gesture that seeks to return social and economic relations back to its pre-disaster configuration? If so, is anyone really being 'saved?' Is this unspoken catastrophe not, in some sense, what would need to take place to remodel our destructive ways of thinking, acting and living currently predicated on the paradigm of capital? Haneke suspends any conclusive cinematic formulations to

these questions by keeping the film's ending open and ambiguous. Before the child can complete the suicidal gesture a man intervenes and pulls him away from the fire, consoling him regarding their predicament and promising to tell the rest of their encampment of his magnanimous intentions, suggesting that the gestural dimension of the act is enough.⁴ In spite of the good deed of the man who saves the child from self-immolation, this penultimate sequence should not be read as an instance of altruism. What the film's conclusion articulates is the *one for all* act – the act upon which New Testament Christianity hinges through the purging of mankind's accumulated corruptions – cannot be completed in a society that is *one for self at the expense of all*, even when the system is in shambles. Where the film should have ended with the return of some final global catastrophe of Old Testament proportions, what we are left with is the coming of the train. Again, the invincible specter of capital remains.

Short Exegesis on Contemporary Cinematic Violence

Moving images as entertainment and depictions of violence are indivisible. Corpses are strewn across the history of cinema and there are no indications that the body count will ever achieve cessation, having only advanced in frequency and intensity with each successive decade. Without lag, Hollywood, the cradle of cinematic violence, perpetuates aesthetics of graphic cruelty in ways both amoral and problematic where mass murders and senseless brutalities occupy the same symbolic space and go undifferentiated from advertisements of anything whatsoever, vapid banter between characters or arbitrary events deployed to incite laughter amidst spectacles of horrendous violence. Two things may be divined from this scenario: as spectators express delight in images of ultra violence and condone its depiction with their patronage, the Hollywood machine responds by amplifying its bloodbaths, in some cases, beyond quantification. Resultantly, cinematic violence grows increasingly more intense and amorally aestheticized while escalating interest from viewers of these spectacles remains proportionately equal to its increase *ad infinitum*. As an alarming contingency mainstream Hollywood cinema (and its small screen domestic counterpart) offers spectators images of violence devoid of the remotest metaphysical reaction and without requirement of any serious level of a reflective response, germinating the 'moral bankruptcy' of the millennial spectator to whom the terms 'ambivalent,' 'apathetic,' and 'desensitized' are regularly applied.

American popular culture is unequalled in its obsessive capacity for rehearsing its own social and geographic destruction. We may conclude from its preponderance that some of Hollywood cinema's favorite agents of destruction tend to be foreign terrorists, monstrous excesses and mutations of humanity, extra-terrestrials (maybe 'foreigners' in general – or the 'Other,' as it were – is more sufficiently encompassing), experiments gone awry, geo-physical phenomena and inclement weather. Singularly or in combination all of the above have annihilated cities and/or portions of the continent in images depicting the death and mutilation of individuals or the vaporization of thousands more or less indiscrim-

inately. Contemporary Hollywood effectively does away with the moral complications of baring witness to spectacles of violence with slick, super-kinetic imagery (Tony Scott/Michael Bay), juxtapositions with campy, slapstick humour (Robert Rodriguez) or diffusing the violent spectacle with pop-culture referentiality and empty meta-cinematic formalism (Quentin Tarantino).

This emergent tradition of filmmaking predicated on concentrated forms of (as thinkers in the field have usefully termed) 'hyperreal' violence, like the socio-political machinations of capitalism, dissuades intellectual reaction and dulls emotional and psychological response through ubiquity, the moral and ethical displacement of the subject, and acceleration: of vapid imagery; of encouraged ignorance; of visual culture as an amnesiac training ground, after all, what would be the point of remembering any of the murders and brutalities witnessed over the course of a Tarantino film when there are many more visual fragments of violence in all permutations of media to wash over our waking lives? Moreover, why respond with anything other than disaffection when the figures in the diegesis are themselves disaffected and could just as easily kill someone as toast a couple of Pop Tarts? Are spectators, then, not responding accordingly? If the characters in the film could just as easily eat a hamburger as they could shoot the person next to them and victims are immediately forgotten and are not accorded a moment of reflection, why should, or would we offer anything more? Increasingly, spectatorship is devoid of critical accountability leaving saucer-eyed, disaffected spectators whose physical immobility before the screen is doppelganger to their intellectual passivity. Here we can locate the significance of Haneke's interventionist cinema as his use of violence and the formal methods he employs to depict it (long takes, static shots, etc.) ultimately attempts to return responsibility to cinematic spectatorship when screening violence (*Benny's Video* (1992) and *Funny Games* (1997) are most notable in this regard). This, I believe, as I too here have endeavored to achieve, is the difference between the value of critical power and the detritus of unreflective critical practice.

The violence in Haneke's films, particularly the suicidal gesture, appears to me to be logical and inevitable given the social, cultural and economic climates in which they occur. In some sense, these acts of violence seem to be the physical extension of capitalism itself. For me, the question that remains is, can we as spectators, desensitized to spectacles of violence, be retrained in our ways of seeing through the very mediums that have disaffected us? I extend this question to the system of millennial capitalism as well.

Kevin Wynter is a graduate student at York University where he is currently completing thesis work on contemporary pornography. Research interests in the immediate future include the films of Bruno Dumont and, what he loosely regards as, new configurations of the horror genre.

NOTES

1. Here *time* is meant to denote cultural time, political time and personal time.
2. Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.
3. Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: space, time and everyday life*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
4. Interestingly enough, in the Christian context, the opposite is the case.

Le Temps du loup/Time of the Wolf

BY FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Michael Haneke's *Le Temps du loup* was made following *La Pianiste* and prior to *Caché*, two films which were more accessible and commercially successful. Haneke claims he wanted to make *Le Temps du loup* before *La Pianiste*, but could only fund the project following the success of the latter. This is understandable. *Le Temps du loup* is a demanding film in every way. As its title suggests, it takes the form of a parable or Grimm-like fairy tale about life in France in the days following a cataclysm. Nothing much happens in the traditional sense of a plot; most of the narrative centres on a mother and her two children waiting in a train station for help to arrive.

Le Temps du loup is a polemical work as can be expected of Haneke. It challenges a complacent middle class viewer to visualize the aftermath of a disaster that reduces society to year 'zero' and to imagine whether morality and social civility would persist in the wake of a catastrophe that forces a regression to a primitive state of existence. This concept has been used before in a number of 'life after the apocalypse' films. Two intelligent ones that come to mind are Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* (and its sequels) or, more recently, Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*. The films explore the breakdown of civilized life and contemplate the possibility of collective survival. Given the insularity, selfishness and illusive sense of security that underpins late capitalist life, these filmmakers are wondering whether human life will continue without a basis of generosity, compassion and tolerance. In this sense these end-of-the-world films are protesting against the existing social world where self-satisfaction supercedes all else and warn of the absence of the conditions that are as necessary to humanity as water and fuel. (The irony in Romero's films is that the resurrection of the dead, hungry for human flesh, does not signal spiritual fulfillment and messianic salvation but its opposite- the basest compulsion to consume). The time of the wolf is, in

Ben's attempted immolation



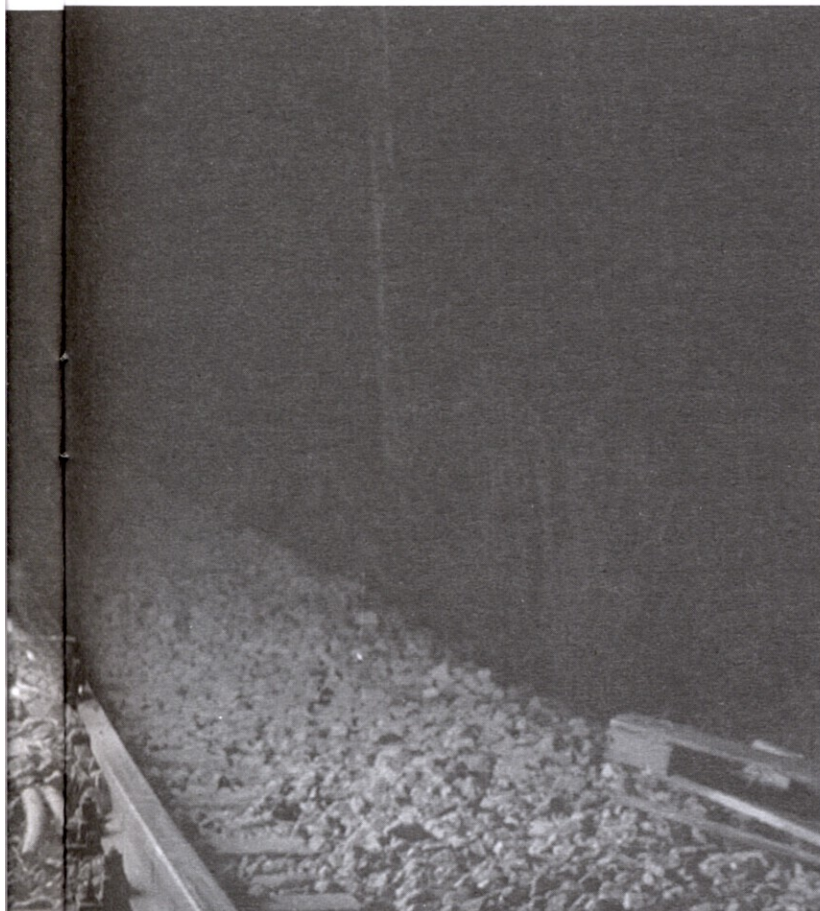
many ways, right now and this urgency and social criticism inform the best of these works.

Although the setting of *Le Temps du loup* is the present (or the very near future), its evocation of a world coping with catastrophe draws from the past and is reminiscent both of the Second World War and of medieval times. The film itself can be read as a philosophical treatise, examining the shift in philosophical ideas that took hold after the war. In the notable absence of God, secular humanists (existentialists, Levinas etc.) promote human agency and ethical accountability as a moral replacement for religious-based morality. Haneke's persistent use of train tracks invokes the Second World War, as does the group's organization under a fascist figure, Koslowski/Olivier Gourmet, empowered by the gun and the emergence of racism in the singling out of the Polish 'foreigners' as scapegoats. The mise-en-scène marked by darkness, fire and the bandit water-vendors on horseback draw a portrait of a medieval world, supported by quasi religious references and superstitions like Ben's stigmata-like nosebleeds and the discussions of the thirty-six Just men who ensure the world's survival or the idea of humans sacrificed as burnt offerings to an angry deity.

The shock of this stark environment is mediated through one's identification with a liberal bourgeois couple, the Laurents, who have packed up their van and have left their home in the city to find refuge at their country house. The film begins with the family van approaching the house. Tired and frayed, the parents begin to unload the van, much as they would on any family excursion, and enter the house. They are surprised to find a family who has taken shelter there; the man is pointing a shotgun at the Laurents, seeing them as a threat to the territory they've claimed. While the Laurents attempt a civilized approach, offering to share the house and their supplies, the man with the gun, growing increasingly agitated,

responds to Georges Laurent's/Daniel Duval proposal with a single shotgun blast, killing him at point blank range. There is a cut to a medium close-up of his wife, Anne Laurent/Isabelle Huppert, her face spattered with her husband's blood. Initially she looks shocked and then she vomits. The moment is as visceral as the eye-ball being sliced near the start of Bunuel's *Un chien andalou*. It is as if Haneke lulls one through identification with the reasonable attractive family only to jolt the viewer into another state necessary to precipitating the rest of the narrative. Set adrift with Anne and her two children, the time of the wolf begins. The three remaining family members, wrenched from the father, the home, shelter, food and water, are left to wander a countryside only vaguely familiar. The new material conditions reveal the absence of any evidence of communal responsibility. Neighbours admonish the Laurents for seeking help. "It's your duty to help", Anne informs one but duty no longer applies. Without fuel, electricity or food and water supplies, the rhythms of a first world are plunged backwards, arrested. Animal carcasses dead from thirst or contamination litter the empty, still landscape.

Le Temps du loup distinguishes between the responses of the children to catastrophe and those of the adults. Children learn and develop by inheriting the values and ethics handed them both at home and in the world at large. A post-apocalyptic landscape automatically passes judgment on an adult world that has failed. Although the film's primary figure of identification initially is Anne – left alone she must survive and protect her children – she becomes increasingly challenged and powerless in the newly defined circumstances. Anne has little to trade and is not empowered by force. Her daughter Eva/Anais Demoustier, fortified by a teenager's resilience and a deep sense of moral justice, takes over as the film's voice and conscience and her brother Ben/Lucas Biscombe silently bears witness to an adult world that has lost its moral bearings. Early on in the film Ben evidences his anger and disappointment which only intensifies as the narrative progresses. After the brutal slaying of his father and the neighbours' refusal to help, Ben finds little comfort. He is frantic when his budgie escapes in the shed, terrified of losing it. This triggers his first nosebleed which expresses his anxiety, despair and feelings of loss of control. The next day Ben is putting the final touches on a memorial/grave for his bird, attesting to his deeply-felt ethical principles. The camera position here is low, as if in support of him. (In the opening moments of the film the van pulls up to the house and Ben's first concern upon arrival is to feed his bird. The significance of this is only evident as the film progresses – his selflessness contrasts with the response of many of the adults.) Following this scene Anne is awakened in the night by Eva's screams that Ben is gone. Anne begins to search for him in the dark and trips over the makeshift memorial – a moment that explains Ben's departure. In a later scene, preceding their arrival at the station, a train passes them in the countryside; Anne, Eva and the boy they befriend run ahead, yelling and gesticulating for it to stop. The camera remains behind with Ben alone, recording his silence. His expression speaks of his awareness that the adult world disappoints and that their efforts to stop the train are futile. Other injustices, like the water vendor who takes a man's watch without giving him his water, are registered by a cut to Ben. Ben will disappear or move away from the adult group at least twice



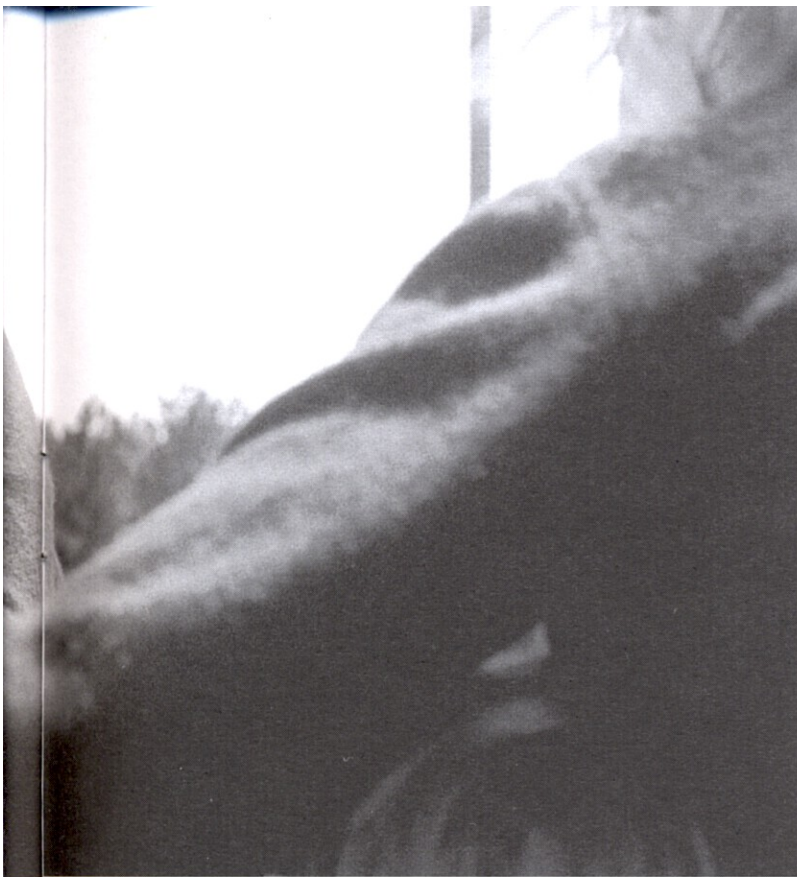


more, and each time his disappearances and nosebleeds comment on a rejection of the hypocrisies and bankruptcy of adult life.

Le Temps du loup is asking its audience to assess the world from the point of view of the next generation who must inherit the disaster created and passed on to them. Haneke subtly underlines this point through camera shots that are often low, as if the events are being witnessed from a child's perspective. The low camera position is most noticeable in the funeral scene of the young child whose death is probably hastened from the lack of hydration. (In a previous scene the mother begs futilely for the water vendor to spare them water for the child who is ill.) The entire funeral is shot at thigh height, with the adults' heads extending out of the frame. The only sound is the mourners' wails and the effect of sound and the fixed low camera produces a condemnation of adult greed which has cost the child his life. The sounds of wailing slowly move off into the distance and the camera remains in place as the daylight recedes; the transition to the next scene begins with the entry of torches at extreme long shot in the back of the frame, creating an uncanny effect, announcing the arrival of the larger group at the station. This is one of the most mesmerizing scenes of the film, in part because of the unusual use of style to highlight the film's sympathy with the children. It is as if the film respects and reflects the small person's point-of-view, a group without a voice or representation. Another young person who articulates a position of protest against the adult group is the adolescent who returns with Ben after his first disappearance. The credits call him 'feral orphan' and he resembles an injured street kid who also rejects the adult rules that have stopped making sense. The young man befriends Eva and explains to her at one point, "I'm happier to live alone – no rules. They always trick you with their rules". Wounded by the adult world, he rejects it and follows his own anarchic intuitions of survival. He prefers an outlaw lifestyle to suffering under existing sys-

tems of corruption and oppression. Despite his outcast status and claims to have himself as his only concern, he expresses his vulnerability and concern for Eva when he offers her a coat that he salvages from a dead man. He struggles with his rejection of community and his need for friendship; Eva understands this and makes an attempt to socialize her friend and insists on the ethics that she knows are fundamental to human life.

The adults are represented by the two groups who occupy the waiting room at the station. The first introduced is the smaller one dominated by Kowalski, a strong arm whose authority is vested in his gun and self-proclaimed leadership. This group functions in a fascist manner. Those with nothing to trade must work and contribute to the protection they enjoy, "nothing is free here". Water is sold by water dealers who trade or rob according to the whim of the supplier. Those with nothing to trade, women for example, can trade sexual services. Kowalski is said to keep order with the pistol, referring to the threat of violence and sexual dominance that he enjoys under the new conditions. Those with nothing to offer, like the woman who begs for her child, receive nothing. The more expanded group who arrive later are slightly more socially conscious. The elderly man is offered goat milk without giving anything in return. They are, however, tainted by other problems like racism, blaming the foreigners for crimes that are unresolved. (It is significant that the man who incites the violence against the Polish man is the one who ultimately saves Ben from death and comforts him, acknowledging, perhaps, the complexity of human nature and the impossibility of clearly delineated heroes.) When M. Laurent's killer appears with the second group Anne demands justice, but with no system in place and with only her word against the murderer's the affair is quickly dropped; Ben disappears again directly afterwards. It is also when this larger group arrives that Azoulay's/Maurice Bénichou daughter is raped at knifepoint and she later commits



suicide. Eva witnesses the attack and quickly shields Ben by covering his eyes and pronouncing her love for him. Later, when the father seeks help to bury his child, there is a shot of Ben observing as the young girl's body is washed and the father carefully dries her hair and prepares her for burial. Neither group at the station evidence strong moral principles and as a result children prove to be vulnerable.

The Laurent family responds to the deteriorating conditions in different ways. Initially Anne is motivated to protect her children; she wisely sends them outside when she senses the volatile nature of the man with the shotgun in their weekend home, consequently sparing them from witnessing their father's death. Similarly, when Lise Brandt/Beatrice Dalle lashes out, she pleads for her to stop "for the children's sake". Anne Laurent soon becomes drained by the physical demands of deprivation. Crippled by thirst and impotence she watches enviously when the elderly woman drinks, and tries feebly to secure her family's 'spot' in the waiting room. Ultimately the best she can do is to try to hide her distress from her children. Eva is the most adept at surviving the difficulties she encounters. She pursues her friendship with the young teenage outcast and remains morally intact – she explains that his actions are wrong because they are selfish and show no consideration for others. "You can't do that, there are children here"... "You don't care for others..." She is the one who notices Ben's absences and protects him from seeing the depravity around them. Eva finds comfort in music and in diarizing her feelings in letters to her dead father which articulate her loneliness, disappointment and isolation. Eva and Ben manifest a world view that is ethical and recognizes social obligation. They slowly usurp the narrative because of this.

In the final scene of the film (preceding the closing shot which acts as an epilogue) Ben decides to act. He rises late at night when others around him are asleep, and a close shot of

Ben registers, for the first time, tears running down his face and then his nose begins to bleed. He proceeds to move towards a bonfire, first building up its intensity, and then slowly undressing and moving closer to the fire. The man who is on night watch senses something, triggered by the horses neighing, and sees the child at a distance approaching the flames. His first response, "Have you gone mad?" is soon modified by his understanding of Ben's actions and Ben's response – his sobs – are the first signs of release he shows. The man sees that Ben is enacting the razor blade eater's tales of those who sacrifice themselves in a form of burnt offering in order to bring salvation," to get the rotten world back on track". (The entertaining razor blade eater may be the only adult with credibility as he is the only one who brings a smile to Ben's face.) Those who sacrifice themselves through fire are variants of the thirty-six Just men, described earlier by the Parisian woman (who at first seems to be someone like Anne, a woman from the city with whom she shares a cigarette, but she soon discredits herself as a potential friend and sane person by revealing her belief in the Just, and she surmises that Kowalski with whom she trades sexual favours, may be one of them). The Just and the men who commit suicide by fire help sustain an undeserving world and guarantee God's protection, and can tip the balance from destruction to survival. Ben's choice of suicide is both a selfless act of salvation and a protest against continuing to live in an immoral world. His blood spattered face intensifies his Christ-like appearance but also recalls his mother's face following her husband's meaningless death. The man who comforts Ben understands this – he assures him that his willingness to act is sufficient and assures him of imminent messianic salvation – that all will be well, they will eat roast pigeon, the dead will come back etc. – and his voice recedes with the camera as he lists these utopian comforting promises.

The film ends with a shot taken from inside a train moving at great speed across the countryside. One only hears the sound of the train and one sees the landscape rushing by. It is a shot that contrasts completely with the rest of the narrative – it is lush with colour (the rest of the film is shot in drained, muted tones), daylight, movement. No person is included in it and it does not represent any character's point-of-view. The shot acts as a commentary rather than a conclusion to a realist narrative. There is no indication that help has finally arrived. The shot suggests hope and continuity, unlike the stasis that characterizes the rest of the story. It offers a feeling of vitality and release. If the film is to be read as a philosophical parable, as a statement about the essential need for ethics and morality and recognizing the obligation to the Other, then Ben's decision to act is what sparks hope. In the aftermath of disaster one must compensate for the failure of religion and self-serving capitalism. If the world is to be reconceived it will need Eva and Ben's compassion towards suffering and their rejection of the immoral conditions they have been handed. In some ways *Le Temps du loup* follows the traditions of post-war European cinema (Rossellini, Bergman) who offer meditations on the terrible failure of humanity, the absence of God and the need to begin again. *Germany Year Zero* ends with the child's suicide. Haneke, investigating similar concerns, speaks from the perspective of a generation who have inherited a similar legacy but its ending which offers a reprieve and thus urges that we begin to think about changing conditions that will enable social life and community before it is too late.



Mourning and Misfortune

9/11 AND THE DOMESTIC TERROR OF PEDOPHILIA

BY DION TUBRETT

Start with a Joke

In the climax of, and seeming inspiration for, *The Aristocrats* (2005), Gilbert Gottfried offers an off-colour monologue at the New York Friar's Club Roast of Hugh Hefner that derails with a joke about September 11, 2001. The joke¹ is met with booing and groans from the audience and calls of "too soon." This event occurs in New York City on September 29, 2001 less than three weeks after the terrorist attack that brought down the towers of the World Trade Center. Gottfried, pausing for a moment, begins his rendition of "The Aristocrats," a joke consisting of a litany of vulgarity and obscenity (including but not limited to incest, pedophilia, bestiality, masturbation, all manners of intercourse – in various combinations with the family members – and scatology sliding into coprophilia).² The joke dispels the earlier tension and the room, full of fellow comedians, delight in this "secret handshake" never dared told in public. The film examines the joke, its effectiveness and meaning through various stand-up comics while never directly connecting its telling with the current climate out of which it erupted. While the joke comes from an earlier vaudeville tradition in comedy, an historical element returned to various times in the film, Gottfried's telling of the joke at this tumultuous moment in American history is not contextualized as a specific reaction: the joke, seen in the film to measure a society's taboos, is here used to cope with the obscene through a parade of vulgarities. It is interesting that the means to navigate through the unspeakable, the earlier joke was for some "too soon," is through the very acts deemed culturally unspeakable. The vehemence and joy, dare I say comfort, with which "The Aristocrats" joke was received points to a shared embrace in the ritual vocalizing of social taboos. This sort of ritual drama (the joke proposes to describe the narrative of one family's variety act) likewise evokes the cathartic release of Aristotle's conception of tragedy. Only here, the emotional release is through the absurdly comedic and grotesquely obscene. Yet Gottfried's telling of "The Aristocrats" acts as a moment uniting the varied effects of terrorism, patriotism, and taboo acts – specifically incest and pedophilia. Taken on its own, and therefore out of context, the political use of pedophilia, toward comedic purposes no less, reads as an incendiary form of absurdist comedy.

Within the contemporary cultural landscape, however, pedophilia and the endangered child are seen not only as effects of the psychological anarchy loosed by terrorism but as an attempt at rebuilding a nation under attack from external terrors by focusing on, in the meekest members of the community, a terror within. Even here there is a contradiction: the same culture that erects the young as a commodity to be treasured and protected (children as our greatest resource) fetishizes the young by selling and coveting the image of youth. Indeed, the contemporary cinematic depictions of youth, specifically the sexualized or endangered youth – quite often the same thing – has become the site for fear and anxiety diluted within cinematic depictions of 9/11. The reasons for this shift may partially be explained as a coping mechanism but its reality goes much deeper; in short, the sexualized child is a dangerous creature, one that has desire and autonomy. The sexualized child, the result of a confluence of factors including the internet, sexual diversity and the renewed commodification of sex as well as new demographics of commercial interests, is a creation that threatens the supremacy of the patriarchal system. In the establishment of a new world order Post-9/11, this threat must be addressed and squashed. The avenue for this in popular culture seems to be the resurgence of the pedophile but moreover the horrors of the sexualized child and their contemporary avenue for expression and autonomy: the internet. Hence, the widespread fears around online sexual predators. I hope that in what follows to examine two distinct, yet connected, perspectives: first, in the 9/11 re-enactment films, but more broadly those films that reference 9/11, a tone of mourning; second, in the recent barrage of films that deal with pedophilia, but more broadly those films that deal with child sexuality, a tone of misfortune. A spirit of mourning haunts the films that seek to mythologize the spirit of America in its battle against terrorism while misfortune pervades those films that address child sexuality, often with disastrous consequences. The political agenda that seeks to rebuild a nation, shaken by the attacks of 9/11, is turned inward and transformed. The psychological side effect of a foreign terror threat becomes changed into a preoccupation with the safety, but more exactly the sexuality, of children. This ideologically manufactured fear is the result of the imperialist and politically conservative agenda of the US that sows its own sorrow and its own pity while reaping a fear soaked culture of Mourning and Misfortune.

9/11 Revisited

United 93 and World Trade Center

It is easy to see the days after September 11, 2001 as ushering in a new paradigm of how to view the world. The attacks on the World Trade Center were etched into cultural consciousness through the repeated spectacle of news coverage. Yet the iconography and symbolism offered via 9/11, including a cultural reaction to it, has only slowly appeared in the cinema. While initially referenced in documentaries like Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), later to appear in his *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Velcrow Ripper's *Scared Sacred* (2004), the influence of 9/11 has increasingly spread to fictional re-enactments of 9/11 and outward on other fictional narratives. It is the latter two types of fiction film where the pervasiveness of 9/11 continues to find its influence. The compilation film *11'09''01 – September 11* (2002) and Spike Lee's *25th Hour* (2002)

were early fiction attempts at incorporating 9/11 into a cultural context. More recently, films that attempt to bridge nonfiction events in a fictional recreation have begun to appear: *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), *The Road to Guantanamo* (Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006). Equally unnerving are those films that have taken terrorism and the collective reaction to it and transferred it to a fictional realm. In 2005, Steven Spielberg released two films that acknowledged the current political climate in the aftermath of 9/11: *War of the Worlds* and *Munich*. While the former owes much to his earlier *Schindler's List* (1993), though clothed in a fantastic apocalypse, the latter enjoys a rather muddled look at the politics and ethics of terrorism. Even M. Night Shyamalan's latest film *The Lady in the Water* (2006), admittedly a fairytale he would tell his own children, offers a narrative clearly formed by a Post-9/11 mentality: the film centres upon a community's banding together to protect the ethereal and waiflike titular visitor and combat the external malevolent threat. Shyamalan's film is a convoluted yet magical failure. The film adopts a mythic structure that complements Post-9/11 fears of destruction at a lurking unseen evil collapsed on to a narrative of unsuspecting characters discovering inner strengths that, united, can overcome the hidden menace. Whatever its failures, it is emblematic of the symbolic appropriation of 9/11 within broader narrative strokes.

It is in the fictional recreations of events surrounding 9/11, however, that ideology becomes obvious and problematic. *United 93*, for example, purports to present the events of United Airlines flight 93 on 9/11, the only hijacked flight not to hit its presumed target; it instead crashed in rural Pennsylvania. The film follows the events of the day in close to real time, on the ground at the FAA and military stations as well as aboard the hijacked flight, and uses several people directly involved in the events of 9/11 to aid the film's authenticity. The victims' families co-operated with the filming to lend further veracity to the presentation of events on the doomed flight. Events were recreated according to the strict timeline of the day. Handheld camerawork achieves a documentary aesthetic that aids in the immediacy and urgency of events. All these elements contribute to a sense of the film as more a document of the events of 9/11 and a memorial to those killed. However, even a brief description reveals the film's inherent bias. As a memorial, it memorializes the victims and events while being concerned with casting heroes rather than humans. It recollects the chaos of 9/11 yet ultimately shows how civilians, including new FAA chief Ben Sliney and the passengers aboard flight 93, exhibited more resolve than the bureaucratic bungling of the military and government. Further, while the actions on the ground reflect the actual events with a great degree of accuracy, the events aboard the flight are less verifiable. Cockpit communications and short cell phone calls with passengers are all the definitive information taken from the downed flight. The film's sequence of events in the air, unlike those on the ground, is therefore a narrative creation and approximation of the events. The story that it does present is a patriotic founding myth of America: in a time of tragedy a country is united against those that would destroy it; while the country's resolve is tested it finds its collective strength in its people who forsake themselves for the greater good of the nation. The film simultaneously acts as memorial to those lost on 9/11, a record of the chaotic events

and those instrumental in minimizing casualties, a testament of American resolve, a critique of the military and government in this time of crisis, and a personification of both the devastation of 9/11 and the triumph and reiteration of the American spirit. Combined with its presence as a domestic Hollywood production, one premiering at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival, itself spawned from the devastation of 9/11, the film's agenda to meticulously present the events of the day is only masked by its "belief that by examining this single event something much larger can be found - the shape of our world today."³ This larger entity is the redefined visage of America which is important now in sustaining a frontier persona against terrorist threats. In this same way, the film promotes a reinvigorated definition of America especially important in a time of war. Like a crass joke, early audiences for the film said "too soon."

World Trade Center seems a perfect complement to *United 93*. It too follows the events of 9/11 but from the perspective of the first police officers to arrive at Ground Zero. Yet similarities in subject matter cannot mask their obvious differences. Stone's film is striking apolitical. By focusing so intimately on the dilemma of two Port Authority officers trapped under the rub-

ble at Ground Zero, the film becomes divorced from any larger social or political meanings. The film's one explicitly political character, marine Dave Karnes, is simultaneously referred to as a "nut" for his conservative religious and political views while also the one responsible for locating the officers. Despite this presence, the film insulates itself against considerations of larger political meanings by its emphasis on the personal and the domestic sphere. The film's reliance on stars (Nicholas Cage plays Sgt. John McLoughlin) and a narrative of individual turmoil over that of an anonymous collective removes a degree of empathy from the film since it exists in a near vacuum of socio-political context. *World Trade Center* has all the elements of a big budget Hollywood blockbuster film and because of that its effect, especially as a narrative of and memorial to 9/11, is considerably lessened. The voice-over that ends the film, spoken by Cage's McLoughlin in the epilogue two years after the attack, points to the goodness of the American spirit that united a nation. But the implications of this statement toward defining an American ideology are hampered by the weight of the personal over the entire film. The visceral power of *United 93*, its ideological position and effect, is only faintly echoed with

Palindromes: another Aviva





World Trade Center. Due to this, Stone's film is not successful. Beneath the rubble of recent memory the film presents a story of individual hope rather than public tragedy; even the other police and rescue personnel act more like an extended family, which in a strange way neuters its power.

9/11, Endangered Children, and the Cultural Landscape

Fears surrounding social taboos are an integral part of maintaining a society's order. In the last century our society embraced a newfound concern for youth in attention to child abuse, reading it as a moral barometer of societal ills. The definition of childhood, and its abuses, became more clearly identified through its institutionalization in the medical and legal systems and its commodification by corporate interests. The 1980s, for instance, saw the rise of repressed memories and recovered memory therapy, the practice of "remembering" forgotten childhood abuses, as well as the not so subtle marketing shift toward the minor consumer, be it for toys or foods. In recent years, especially with the increased usage of the internet, children's protection has become a very public concern. Amid a constant media barrage of pedophiles and child abuse, the conservative governments in North America are using children as an assured platform for fear-based legislation. In Canada this year, the government has vowed to raise the Age of Consent to Sexual Activity from 14 to 16 as well as implement more measures for locating and arresting child pornographers and sex offenders. A Canadian poll has supported this conservative push, revealing the awareness of society to child endangerment. This past June (2006), a Leger Marketing survey of behaviour entitled the "Morality Barometer" found that "Canadians view pedophilia as the most immoral type of behaviour" at 81%, while 65% found "Sexual relations before the age of 16" immoral.⁴ This acts as further confirmation of the government's direction and an affirmation of its fears.

American network television has done its part to maintain the constant fear of the endangered child. The NBC weekly dramatic series *Law and Order: Special Victim's Unit* (1999-Present), now also in syndication, devotes many of its "ripped from the headlines cases" to sex crimes, many involving children. Another NBC series, the news magazine show, *Dateline NBC* has interested itself in hunting internet "would-be pedophiles."⁵ Since 2004, the show has aired at least five different "specials" entitled "To Catch A Predator," with host Chris Hansen. The programs, each from a different region of the US, follow the machinations of an undercover sting operation with an online watchdog group calling itself Perverted Justice.⁶ The volunteer group frequents online chat rooms posing as children, acting as bait for lurking pedophiles. Once a "child" has been contacted and the conversation turns sexual, the organization would then attempt to get personal information so that it could post this on their website. On the television programs, however, the sting is more elaborate. Working with local authorities and *Dateline NBC*, the online organization offers a location for the illegal activities suggested by the online chatters. This house would be outfitted with hidden cameras. The invited online guest would be met inside not by the supposed child but *Dateline NBC* host Chris Hansen. Armed with the transcript of the illicit online chat, Hansen then questions the guests as to their conduct and intentions. When Hansen finally introduces himself as from *Dateline NBC* a camera crew suddenly appears

nearly chasing the online guest outside and into the waiting arms of the police. The program also follows the online guests' arrests and time in police custody. Like a perverse episode of *Candid Camera*, the show flourishes as much from the taboos being broken by the online chatters as from the sensationalistic and exploitative nature of the hidden camera reality show.

Despite the success of the *Dateline NBC* programs, both in viewers and arrested sex offenders, it has become the site of its own unplanned controversy. In May 2006 at the United States Department of Justice Project Safe Childhood Implementation Launch, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales offered an alarming statistic: "It has been estimated that, at any given time, 50,000 predators are on the internet prowling for children."⁷ This startling number was quickly questioned by some media outlets eventually landing in the *New York Times*.⁸ *Legal Times* first published a piece shortly after the announcement which traced the source of the statistic as *Dateline NBC*. The article states that the statistic could not be confirmed by the FBI, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, or the Crimes Against Children Research Center. Furthermore, after contacting Hansen regarding the number, it was attributed to former FBI agent Ken Lanning, who subsequently questioned the number's accuracy:

Lanning, who spent 30 years at the FBI, is skeptical about the stat, whoever originated it. "Was it just a WAG — a wild-assed-guess?" he says. "It could have been." Lanning theorizes that there may be something special about the number 50,000 and crime scares.

In the late 1980s, the figure was cited by the media as an estimate of the number of people slaughtered annually by satanic cults. In the early 1980s, it was similarly cited as the number of children abducted annually by strangers.

"For some reason the number 50,000 keeps popping up," he says. "Maybe because it's not small and not large. It's a Goldilocks number."⁹

The allure of "50,000 [online sexual] predators" speaks to a desire to embrace this fear both commercially confirmed, by television ratings, and socially accepted, by television viewers and government officials despite having no basis in fact.

This kind of constructed fear, promoted by the media, has in a Post-9/11 context taken on greater zeal. With daily terror reports and colour-coded alerts, a mood ring of national paranoia, the rearticulating of pedophilia in popular culture has assumed a new domestic relevance. Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (1999), includes pedophiles as one site of fear-mongering in popular culture. Glassner's larger thesis, "Our fear grows, I suggest, proportionate to our unacknowledged guilt," connects with his overview of the fear-mongering associated with pedophiles and internet predators.¹⁰ He observes that "a conspicuous subtext in coverage during the late 1970s and 1980s was adult guilt and anxiety about the increasing tendency to turn over more of children's care to strangers."¹¹ This guilt theory of constructed fear shifts with technology. "In more recent years child pornographers and pedophiles have come in handy for fear mongering about the latest variety of baby-sitter: the Internet."¹² I would add that the addition of the internet serves

to bolster other discourses around children and sexuality that will be shortly addressed.

The fears surrounding children's protection has not deterred its critical debate, especially when connected with institutions of power. In the late 1970s in France, a group of intellectuals and artists vocalized their disagreement with the current legislation and reforms dealing with sexual behaviour. One of the members, Michel Foucault, feared the reactionary political trend disguised in "an overall movement tending toward liberalism" that only served to strengthen the conservative political will of the government.¹³ Foucault's conclusions surrounding the institutionalizing of pedophilia in law and culture point not only to his contemporary concerns but also act as a harbinger for our current condition:

Now what we are defining and, therefore, what will be found by the intervention of the law, the judge, and the doctor, are dangerous individuals. We're going to have a society of dangers, with, on the one side, those who are in danger and, on the other, those who are dangerous. And sexuality will no longer be a kind of behavior hedged in by precise prohibitions, but a kind of roaming danger, a sort of omnipresent phantom, a phantom that will be played out between men and women, children and adults, and possibly between adults themselves, etc. Sexuality will become a threat in all social relations, in all relations between members of different age groups, in all relations between individuals. It is on this shadow, this phantom, this fear that the authorities would try to get a grip through an apparently generous and, at least general, legislation and through a series of particular interventions that would probably be made by the legal institutions, with the support of the medical institutions. And what we will have there is a new regime for the supervision of sexuality; in the second half of the twentieth century it may well be decriminalized, but only to appear in the form of a danger, a universal danger, and this represents a considerable change. I would say that the danger lay there.¹⁴

Glassner's "culture of fear" is reminiscent of Foucault's "society of dangers" without the awareness of power relations in society. The guilt Glassner names as the source of contemporary fears intersects with Foucault's dangerous sexuality as the nexus of current fears of children and sexuality; more exact, the fears are aimed toward children's sexuality and more generally their autonomy. In contemporary culture, children's autonomy has become linked with the internet.

The rise of the internet has created a terrain for information and expression never before imagined. The internet phenomenon of the blog, an online diary, has become a source not only of personal expression but also a rival for corporate new services. In the personal sphere the blog offers a venue for recording and posting to the world an individual's thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, and an opportunity to socially network to others anywhere in the world. This most democratic of arenas (only computer access is required with no fees for basic service) has been quickly embraced by youth. Websites like *Myspace*

have become not only socially lucrative for tweens (9-12) and teens but financially rewarding as well. Beginning in 2003, within two years Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. would buy the online service for \$580 million "as part of a strategy to rapidly build up the media conglomerate's internet presence" while this year in July it reached "No. 1 U.S. Web site ... [and] accounted for 4.46 percent of all internet visits for the week ending July 8."¹⁵ The popularity of services like *MySpace* accomplishes several things: it offers an area for youth to create a personal space as well as a community where relations are built on mutual interest and desire; it offers a commercial venue to target and analyze this demographic, commonly a site for commercial music and films; it offers a measure of interactivity and freedom otherwise often impossible; it allows youth the opportunity to own and maintain something that is an extension and expression of themselves. The negative flipside to youth's construction of identity and autonomy is the duplicity offered by online identities: this is the fear behind lurking online sexual predators. The same power freely to create an online persona also brings the threat of duplicitous personas. Online sexual predators posing as youths represent the abuses and mistrust of online autonomy. Similarly, the deception of online identities is the same tool used by law enforcement, such as the FBI's Innocent Images National Initiative, and civilian groups, like the above mentioned Perverted Justice, to hunt for sexual predators.

All of these interests point to a fear not so much for the endangered child but rather for the child's sexuality and autonomy. A child's self-awareness and power, given more meaning and immediacy with the internet, threatens their subservient position within the existing patriarchal and capitalist systems. This fear seems to have always existed, although somewhat tempered with Freud's studies on infantile sexuality, but the internet has renewed the fear by providing a venue and institutional framework for the child's psycho-social development – at least partially informed by sexuality. While sex crimes including those perpetrated through the internet ought to be taken seriously, it seems as if the popular media reception of these concerns belies a deeper and darker reality at the centre of society; namely, the threat to the existing socio-political hierarchy, a threat to social relations and the economic infrastructure, by the appearance of the child empowered by technology and displaying a sense of self alongside desire. This empowered child is rendered a victim in social discourse, inverting and dispelling its power, being integrated into a narrative of victimization at the hands of sexual predators on the same online terrain that offers the child power in the first place.

The popularized narrative of the endangered child, increasingly rampant in the cinema, gathers the socio-political fears of a Post-9/11 world that are largely absent from cinematic recreations and recollections of 9/11. The following list of films dealing with children and sexuality, including pedophilia, since 9/11, while not exhaustive, at least reveals the pervasiveness of this theme within popular culture: *Ken Park* (Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, 2002); *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003); *Thirteen* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003); *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003); *The Woodsman* (Nicole Kassell, 2004); *Bad Education* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004); *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (Asia Argento, 2004); *Birth* (Jonathan Glazer, 2004); *Palindromes* (Todd Solondz, 2004); *Mysterious Skin* (Greg Araki, 2004); *Me*

and *You and Everyone We Know* (Miranda July, 2005); *The Aristocrats* (Paul Provenza, 2005); *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005); *Down in the Valley* (David Jacobson, 2005); *Twelve and Holding* (Michael

Cuesta, 2005); *Whole New Thing* (Amnon Buchbinder, 2005); *The Night Listener* (Patrick Stettner, 2006).¹⁶

The Endangered Child and the Threat of Desire

Palindromes* and *Me and You and Everyone We Know

The conceit of *Palindromes* involves the performance of the central character Aviva, a teenage girl who wants a baby, by eight different actresses. In the vein of Luis Buñuel's *Cet Obscur Objet du Désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*, 1977), director Todd Solondz uses actresses of different ethnicities, ages, and body types in a way that points to his divergent tone of absurdist dark comedy with political satire. Aviva's desire for a baby takes her through a hit parade of controversial and sensational issues like abortion, pedophilia, pro-life crusaders and religious conservatives overlaid upon a society that exists only at darkly comic extremes: Aviva's mother Joyce/Ellen Barkin values material possessions like the "N'Sync tickets" and "GAP account" more than having another child, telling Aviva of her own abortion,¹⁷ while Mama Sunshine/Debra Monk has a family of abandoned children, with assorted disabilities and medical conditions, that are raised in a household that is absurdly Christian. These two spheres dominate the tone of the film yet both are battling over the same terrain: the endangered child.

Aviva's desires are not recognized by any of the adults in the film: not her mother, not the pedophile "Joe"/"Earl"/Bob/Stephen Adly Guirgis, not Mama Sunshine. Aviva's sexual awareness, albeit a child sexuality, is incompatible with the adult sexuality she encounters and is subsumed by the adults surrounding her. They each impose their own values and desires upon the child, treating the child as if it were a blank slate. Aviva's mother cannot fathom her daughter's desire to have a baby and forces her to have the abortion against her will. The operation goes sour and results in a hysterectomy which robs Aviva of the possibility of having children – the symbol of her desire and autonomy. When Aviva runs away from home and meets "Joe" on the road, he reacts to their sexual encounter with shame by abandoning her, while she sees it as the beginning of a healthy relationship. When they meet again later in the film "Joe," now revealed as "Earl," is more concerned with concealing their relationship with a "backstory," an acknowledgement of its illegal nature, than attempting to understand Aviva's position. Mama Sunshine's protection over her large family, each member with their own special needs, places her in a role of shepherd to her flock. And her devotedly religious ideals, seeing the child as nothing more than empty vessels of purity, are incompatible with the very reality of the child. After one of the children shows Aviva the aborted fetus section of the garbage dump, Mama Sunshine confides in her: "There are such terrible evil things out there in the world and you're such an innocent. So pure and untarnished, like a little angel." These encounters reinforce the inability of anyone, specifically the adults, to see Aviva as a distinct entity beyond their own ideologies. Her autonomy is continually subverted by the contesting discourses that surround her. Her position as an endangered child, one that each adult seeks to protect in their own way, only serves her further harm.

One constant across all of the performances of Aviva is a stoicism bordering on numbness. This is markedly clear after her abortion. Once she is unable to have a baby due to an accident during the procedure, her identity collapses. Her willingness to have a relationship with a pedophile causes more pain: not because of the potential physical or psychological traumas but because he views her as a child for his lust, not a reciprocating partner. Aviva is caught between poles of obsessive capitalism, lust, and religion. Each of these ideologies promotes protection of the child.¹⁸ None of these ideologies acknowledges the child as anything more than an empty receptacle to continue their belief system. But what is worse, and telling for the thesis of the film, is that not only does each of these competing philosophies of child protection result in child endangerment or outright harm, but results in whatever autonomy the child might have being doomed anyway. Near the film's conclusion, Aviva has a party and invites Mark Weiner/Matthew Faber. The brother of Dawn, teen protagonist of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) whose funeral opens this film, has by its end been accused of child molestation. He speaks to Aviva at the party and nihilistically, or realistically, refutes her hope for self-actualization or change:

People always end up the way they started out. No one ever changes. They think they do but they don't. If you're the depressed type now, that's the way you'll always be. If you're the mindless happy type now, that's the way you'll be when you grow up. You might lose some weight, your face might clear up, get a body tan, breast enlargement, a sex change. It makes no difference. Essentially, from in front, from behind, whether you're 13 or 50, you'll always be the same.

Yet, the last chapter of the film, titled "Aviva," has her reunite with Judah, the boy that first got her pregnant so that she might realize her desire with him once again. During this sex sequence, Aviva is performed by all the actresses. If the multiplicity of actresses might have implied a kind of universality for her experience, here it rekindles hope in the resuscitation of her desire. The film ends with the rearticulation of her desire and with that her autonomy. The youngest actress/Emani Sledge, who first portrayed Aviva, speaks offscreen to Judah. She turns to address the camera: "This time, I'm going to be a mom." The discourse of child desire and autonomy is a threat that the film clearly levels at the viewer. However, as has been seen, the incompatibility of childhood autonomy with the obscenities of capitalism, patriarchy or religion renders it as imaginary, and therefore empty, play.

Me and You and Everyone We Know is much more playful in its depiction of child sexuality and internet sexual predators. It still manages to explore the anxiety at the intersection of the child and sex. The film explores alienation and the distances between individuals, both adult and child. As a result, several storylines in the film include children: a preteen girl Sylvie/Carlie Westerman dreams of her future life keeping a hope chest and scrapbook for her future appliances; two brothers (the teenage Peter/Miles Thompson and the much younger Robby/Brandon Ratcliff) engage in a sexually explicit chat with a mysterious online stranger; two teenage girls (Heather/Natasha Slayton and Rebecca/Najarra Townsend) sexually flirt

with an adult; those same teenage girls also perform fellatio on Peter as a test but he fails to tell the difference. This most rudimentary description highlights the degree to which the children define themselves through sexuality and desire.

One subplot, involving Robby's explicit online chat with a stranger, points to the chief fears of the child as sexual being and its journey to self-awareness. Robby stumbles upon Peter's risqué online conversation with an older woman. His first question for the woman, voiced to his brother, shows his innocent naiveté in his brother's sexually charged online chat: "Ask her about bologney!" Peter is wary about this contact exclaiming that "everyone just makes stuff up on these things. It's probably a man pretending to be a woman, okay? Just picture a fat guy with a little wiener!" Once Peter feels bored with this chat, as he assumes it is a man, he asks Robby for advice on what to write:

Robby: I want to poop back and forth.

Peter: What? What does that mean?

Robby: Like I'll poop into her butt hole and then she'll poop it back into my butt hole. And then we'll just keep doing it back and forth with the same poop.

Robby's logic about sexual relations is perhaps the funniest scene in the film, or even recent cinema. Yet the connection he feels with this mysterious stranger represents a lack in his life. His reaction to his mother's leaving is to attempt to fill that void through this tenuous online world without any awareness of its duplicity, despite his brother's warnings. Because of this desire, Robby continues his online chatting on his own, outside the supervision of his brother. Even as his conversation continues, his logic does not correspond to the logic of the adult to whom he is writing. His code for the naughty behaviour he thought of,))<>((, is a perfect amalgam of the child, the adult, the technological, and the insurmountable distance across this divide. The online chatters arrange to meet in person. Their meeting, overlaid with much tension, results in a very touching sequence. Robby and his online "friend" meet in the park. The audience realizes the online woman is in fact the same art curator encountered earlier in the film. She quickly recognizes her error in assuming her online suitor as an adult. He touches her hair. She kisses him gently then gets up and leaves. Their mutual alienation was temporarily relieved by their internet relationship although she acknowledges his compassion and attention. The film is full of such interchanges where through the child's perspective, and because of the child's desire, these relationships are created and valued rather than feared and demeaned.

Conclusion

The examples from *Palindromes* and *You and Me and Everyone We Know* offer a perspective of the threat of child endangerment in popular culture filtered through other equally real threats: the harm from the power of ideology; the harm of alienation. In short, the films focus on the harm of not communicating with the child. We live in a world that theoretically protects its children but in reality has created a world of excesses, both capitalist and religious, that pledge to not recognize the child. The result is that the world Post-9/11, a world fed by fear and protection, has abandoned its children. If the United States wishes to maintain its conservative hold over the world, it will only

continue to do so at the detriment of those that will one day lead it. A negation of a child's sexuality or autonomy is a negation of all sexuality, all autonomy. It is for this reason that we ought to be more critical of what stories our media presents us with and not let conservative interests police us in the domestic sphere. Instead, we should recognize children and their development as we ought to recognize and respect each other.

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NOTES

1. The joke is only paraphrased in the film. In a later interview, Gottfried recalled his joke, its impetus and its response:
At any tragic event that happens, there's always about five jokes that seem to be everywhere all at once. I wanted to be one of the first, so mine was "I have to leave early tonight. I have to catch a plane to L.A. Unfortunately, they couldn't get me a direct flight. We have to make a stop at the Empire State Building." And that was like, you know, groans from the audience. Boos. One guy yelled out "Too soon!" I guess I should have waited five minutes. (Amelie Gillette, "Interview: Gilbert Gottfried," *The A.V. Club*, 9 August 2005, www.avclub.com/content/node/25378/2. Date accessed: 13 August 2006)
2. Even a full transcript of the joke, censored most anywhere, does not do Gottfried's performance justice.
3. Paul Greengrass, www.united93movie.com. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
4. www.legermarketing.com/documents/spclm/060612ENG.pdf. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
5. This in itself has been the source of some contention. Arrests of internet users who communicate online with "children," either law enforcement or another adult, makes the crimes of these "would-be pedophiles" impossible to commit since they are not in fact communicating or conspiring with an actual minor – quite a legal conundrum.
6. www.perverted-justice.com. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
7. www.usdoj.gov/ag/speeches/2006/ag_sppech_060517.html. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
8. Don Kaplan, "News Mag Dumps Molest Data," *New York Times*, 2 June 2006, www.nypost.com/entertainment/69491.htm. Date accessed: 16 June 2006.
9. Jason McLure, "Inadmissible. Numbers Game: Gonzales Launches DOJ Project Safe Childhood with Mysterious Figure," *Legal Times*, 22 May 2006, www.law.com/jsp/dc/PubArticleDC.jsp?id=1147770329023. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
10. Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, 72.
11. Glassner 32.
12. Glassner 33.
13. Michel Foucault, "Sexual Morality and the Law," *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault, 1977-1984*, Trans. Alan Sheridan et. al., Ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, New York: Routledge, 1988, 272.
14. Foucault 281.
15. NEW YORK (Reuters). 11 July 2006, today.reuters.com/news/articlenews.aspx?type=technologyNews&storyID=2006-07-11T154250Z_01_N11382172_RTRUKOC_0_US-MEDIA-MYSPACE.xml. Date accessed: 13 August 2006.
16. *L.I.E.* (2001) premiered at Sundance in January 2001 but got its limited release in September 2001. Its narrative of pedophilia, youth alienation and desire makes it an omen for the films that would follow in the wake of 9/11. Director Michael Cuesta's follow up feature, *Twelve and Holding* (2005), offers a sugar coated narrative of childhood desires that includes a subplot involving a young girl's wish for a sexual relationship with an adult.
17. Aviva's mother describes her rationale for her abortion, appealing to what she assumes is her daughter's interests (concert tickets, clothes, ice cream) and continues: "We couldn't have afforded it. It would have been too much of a strain and we all would have been miserable." This is the first instance in the film of adults imposing desire upon Aviva rather than acknowledging her real desire.
18. The pedophile "Joe"/"Earl"/Bob, in addition to his lust for Aviva, acts as child protector through his assassination of an abortion doctor. Even here he accidentally kills the doctor's daughter, adding to the sinisterly bleak tone of the film.

Intuitions in Africa

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE IN *THE CONSTANT GARDENER*

BY EDWARD GALLAFENT

"So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting, too."

—Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness', 1902

There are two kinds of knowledge possessed by characters in *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005)¹. The film explores intuitions that we can call personal, generally understandings about what others are doing or feeling, or could be made to do or feel, and knowledge that is political, moving from suspicions to proofs, that is concerned with systemic conspiracies rather than individual acts. This latter kind is the knowledge that changes hands, possessed first by the principal woman in the story and later by the principal man, in a film that divides clearly into two parts, as I shall argue. I want to consider what this kind of knowledge can do and what it cannot do. I also want to explore how the two kinds of knowledge jostle for position and how one replaces the other.

New Lives: Wives in Kenya

I want to begin by addressing another kind of knowledge, which is our awareness of the background of this narrative and setting. In taking glamorous stars and locating them in Africa, the film is doing something that is familiar through its cinematic antecedents. We shall understand its positions better if we see how it both conforms to earlier versions of the subject and how it departs from them. In this spirit I will invoke two films as points of reference, both of which involve a couple arriving in Kenya for the first time. They are linked to *The Constant Gardener*, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, by all three being winners of prizes, including Academy Awards. One of the films is still quite well-known: *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985), starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, its continuing currency no doubt helped by the fact that one of its major sources is a distinguished and still-read memoir, Isak Dinesen's book of the same name². The other is the product of a different national cinema, that of Germany: *Nirgendwo in Afrika* / *Nowhere in Africa* (Caroline Link, 2001), starring Juliane Köhler, set in the Kenya of the late nineteen thirties and forties and based on an autobiographical novel by Stefanie Zweig, which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2003.

In each case a central figure — we might say, the figure who makes this film's plot happen, without whom there would be no story to tell — is a young woman, emerging from a high middle-class European background. The films begin with some preliminary matters in Europe which result in the woman's journey to Kenya. Karen Blixen / Meryl Streep is leaving behind the sexually and socially complex situation that is the result of her formative years in Denmark. Jettel Redlich / Juliane Köhler, a member of a rich Jewish family, is fleeing the increasing ferocity of Nazi persecution in pre-war Europe, and in *The Constant Gardener* Tessa / Rachel Weisz, an English heiress with an Italian background, is falling for the idea of turning a love affair with

a minor diplomat into a new life in Africa. In each case the matter of marriage is a part of the beginning of the story, and none of the women are presented as sexual ingénues. Karen arrives in Kenya to initiate her new life by marrying Baron Bror Blixen / Klaus Maria Brandauer, Jettel is rejoining her husband, and Tessa seems to be happy to make her going to Africa and her marriage to Justin Quayle / Ralph Fiennes indistinguishable parts of a whole. In a scene towards the beginning of the film we see her arrive at Justin's office to ask him to take her to Africa and in effect to propose marriage to him, as if they are not issues she wishes to separate.

In all three cases the films dramatise the reaction of a strong-willed, sexually attractive woman to the Kenyan world, and the reaction of men to such a woman. So it is not surprising that the narratives are all in various degrees concerned with adultery, and the possibilities of fulfilment or self-abasement that it can be used to express. This is most positive in *Out of Africa*, in which the relation of Karen to white hunter Denys Finch Hatton/Robert Redford is at the centre of the story. In *Nirgendwo in Afrika* it remains a presence, both enacted in Jettel's affair with a British soldier, and repressed with some difficulty in her relation to Süßkind/Matthias Habich, a figure somewhat like Denys. While the matter of adultery figures differently in *The Constant Gardener*, it is no less important. I shall be going on to argue that suspicions of adultery, fantasies of it, the desire for it, and failed denials of it, haunt the central figures in the first half of the film and ideal of the faithful woman, which becomes defined as the woman about whom everything is known, is important to the second half.

Finally there is the matter of children. All three films raise the question of either the loss or postponement of the woman's ability to have children. Karen is unable to bear children as a result of disease, the syphilis she contracts from Blixen. Her interest in establishing a school for the children of her African

workers is an explicit substitute for the children that she cannot have. Jettel appears to be the exception, as she brings a single daughter to Africa, but when towards that film's conclusion she conceives another child it is treated as a cue to the family's return to Germany – no child is born in Africa to either woman. This would perhaps be insignificant except for the imagery of a populous black Africa which connects the films, and particularly images of numbers of black children, such as those who sometimes surround the mostly solitary white figure of Jettel's daughter. The numerousness of black children seems to comment on the rareness of white ones. In *The Constant Gardener* Tessa is more than once surrounded by black children and shown in relation to them. She is pregnant in the film's early scenes, but her child, for no reason that is given in the narrative, is stillborn³. So the inability to create, or to extend, a white family in the Kenyan world connects the films.

There are two areas where suggestive distinctions can be made. The first has to do with the survival of the couple, and particularly of the woman. Both the earlier films have the shape of a journey undertaken and returned from. After Denys's death and burial Karen returns to Denmark, never to return to Africa. In *Nirgendwo in Afrika* both partners survive: at its close Jettel and her family (and her unborn son) are leaving Kenya for Europe, again never to return. In contrast *The Constant Gardener* is a jour-

ney from which there can be no return – Tessa's actions result in her murder and she is buried, in accordance with her wishes, in African soil. By the end of the film, while it is evident that Justin is dead, it is not clear whether he is buried in Africa or in England.

Another difference is the point of the history of Kenya, and of world history, that the films address: the years of the First World War and its aftermath (1914-31) in *Out of Africa*, the Second World War years in *Nirgendwo in Afrika*, and twenty-first century Africa in *The Constant Gardener*. We can see that the endings that I have sketched above precisely reflect perceptions of the political situation of their times: In *Out of Africa* it is the end of the era of the "old Africa" marked by the "noble" death of the white pioneer figure, as well as the world wide economic depression (it is financial failure which forces Karen to sell the farm)⁴. In *Nirgendwo in Afrika* the survival of the young family emblematises the famous moment of hope for a new social democratic Europe, a better world after the end of the war. In *The Constant Gardener* the contemporary political moment makes for a world in which neither the man nor the woman nor the child of the couple survive.

Acknowledged Truths

I want to consider under this heading the attitude that the film takes to the political knowledge that it uses. In her essay on



paranoid and reparative reading, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens her argument by quoting a series of statements about the global politics of the HIV epidemic. Some of them – such as “that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes” – seem evidently in tune with the film in front of us. She quotes them not in order to establish, nor to question, the degree to which we accept them, but rather to ask about what happens when we accept them. She argues as follows:

...for someone to have an unmythified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences.

She goes on to make the case for a different approach:

...open[ing] a space for moving from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do* – the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows?⁵

The relevance of this to *The Constant Gardener* is that it is a film that does not try to demonstrate or prove that its political insights are true. Rather, it assumes that we accept them, even if we do so with resignation, or anger, or cynicism. Explicit statements of political critique are offered by a number of characters late in the film but function largely as confirmations of what is taken to be accepted fact. I think it is arguable that none of the main players in the action – either heroes or villains, or whatever is in between – would dispute them. They differ only in their response to them and in their relation to the specific conspiracy, to do with the testing of unsafe drugs, that is uncovered.

What are these general propositions? I will offer an outline. They are: That the West generally holds the lives of Africans as worthless. That drug companies look on potential global health catastrophes as a source of profit. That those in power associated with them are also concerned primarily with matters of profit and of employment (in the first world) and of corporate strength. That in the context of a situation of endemic disease and specifically in the light of the HIV epidemic, Africa represents a useful laboratory for testing drugs in a context where results can be massaged or falsified at will, and where deaths can be both concealed from public scrutiny and excused as inevitable anyway. It is these insights that are shared – it is the



question of what if anything must be done with them that divides the characters.

The British High Commission

Under this heading I want to say something about the particular national characteristics of the film's world. Given that it is set in the present day, there are ways in which it seems to wish to invoke the Kenya of the past. It completely excludes Americans, even in minor parts, as if it wants to present an Africa, and even an England, for which America seems hardly to exist. One role in which it would have been unsurprising to find an American, namely the head of the drug marketing company that is testing in Kenya, is in fact played as a foul-mouthed Englishman with a working class background, as if a gangster had turned executive. The pharmaceutical company manufacturing the suspect drug of the plot is located as Canadian, but even that appears mainly in the form of a promotional film viewed on a computer screen⁶. The presentation of the British High Commission in Nairobi offers not simply a world of Englishness but one in which colonial habits seem to continue almost unchanged: spacious period houses, African servants, and leisure to enjoy cricket and golf. When Justin returns to England, the sequence at the Foreign Office with his superior (and one of the film's villains) Pellegrin / Bill Nighy takes this note and brings it up short just this side of parody, or perhaps asks us to recognise that such people are close to self-parody. The single exception to the uniform Englishness of the High Commission staff is Ghita Pearson / Archie Panjabi, a young woman with Asian roots, but her performance serves only to underline the degree to which Englishness of manner can be adopted or internalised by a figure to whom it may, or may not be native.

Englishness is reinforced by casting and performance, in both the major figures of Justin and the station chief Sandy Woodrow / Danny Huston (playing the part as English), and in minor roles such as that of Gloria / Juliet Aubrey, Sandy's wife, presented as a stereotype of the high bourgeois Englishwoman. These seem designed to emphasise a world not touched by modern Africa, in retreat from it or denial of it – perhaps in turn in retreat from contemporary England as well. The mood is established by the early sequence in which Sandy has to tell Justin of the probability that Tessa has been killed. The emphasis, via excellent performance, is on traditional upper class national (male) character, articulated through personal horror accepted stoically: "Good of you to tell me, Sandy. Can't have been easy".

In the figure of Justin the idea of upper class Englishness is linked to the activity of gardening. It is established early (the sequence in which he is wrapping seedlings to take with him to Africa) and develops into to his enthusiasm for his African garden as the site of exotic fertility. He is presented as if his only activity is that of a gentleman naturalist, involved with planting which is not agriculture. The film has no interest in giving the audience any idea of his diplomatic work. This conforms with the pattern of the earlier films in that the husband's relation to Africa seems tangential or less relevant. It is the woman's relation both to the place and the people that is the moving force in the story.

What distinguishes the world of these expatriates from the colonial order than they are imitating? One difference is

expressed through an emphasis on the depopulation of white settlement⁷. The scene of the announcement of Tessa's probable death is typical, opening with a long shot of a side of the High Commission, in which Sandy and Justin are alone. The building seems almost empty; there is no need to seek privacy, no bustling office from which the two men must exclude themselves. Even in the sequences in which a social world of expatriates and/or white Kenyans might be shown as extensive, such as the party and Tessa's funeral service, there are no more than a handful of white figures. In contrast Meirelles stresses the qualities of the Africans' world in the shots of the streets of Kibera, "one of Nairobi's larger slums, a vast brown smear of smoking tin houses"⁸. The key image here, expressive of the sheer extensiveness of this teeming space and suggesting that it has no stable borders or edges, is that of the vista of rusting corrugated iron roofs. Compare this with the emptiness of the sets occupied by the English, implying that these spaces speak of a populated social life that has now deserted them⁹. As I noted earlier an obvious part of the contrast is built around children, the frequent reference to images of numbers of African children becoming images of numerosity itself, while the expatriates are either childless, or have children that we hardly see.

Part One : The world of Desire : Adultery and Paranoia

The first part of the film is characterised by feelings of anxiety and paranoia, and fantasies of adultery. To see how this works we need to look at its structure. It presents Justin and Tessa via a series of flashbacks, some but not all of which are loosely located as Justin's memories. We see scenes in which he first meets Tessa, and later is proposed to by her. Just as in the earlier films, there is no interest in the journey. The scene shifts to Nairobi and to passages with and without Justin some months into their life in the city, in which we see Tessa heavily pregnant. A sequence in hospital after she has lost her baby is followed by her return to their Kenyan home. The final flashback is the passage in which Tessa is about to board a plane for her trip to Loki; she will be murdered on the return journey. All of these scenes are shown in order, but the one at the airport is a reprise, for it also constituted the opening sequence of the film.

By placing the airport sequence as a prologue to the main action Meirelles is foregrounding the subject (but not the fact) of Tessa's adultery¹⁰. It is the governing piece of paranoid knowledge for Justin in these first scenes and is much more important to him than whatever Tessa might or might not be finding out about the operation of drug testing in Kenya. It may be worth considering how the opening scene articulates this by looking at it in detail.

The spoken soundtrack begins substantially before the narrative image, played over the production credits. We gather that this is a moment in a journey, and before the image appears we learn something of Justin's attitude to it. His first words are to refuse help with a bag of some kind, and he follows this by a statement that sounds like part of an ongoing discussion: "I still don't see why you couldn't wait a couple of weeks. Why go all the way up to Loki?". The first images show us Justin and Tessa parting, with endearments and embraces that convey the feeling that the woman is offering something like an apology, or a reassurance, and that the man is resisting, refusing quite to accept the message that the parting kisses are intended to give. Tessa walks towards the aircraft with her travelling companion,

Arnold Bluhm / Hubert Koundé, with the innocent gesture of intimacy of handing him her travelling bag — presumably the one that had produced Justin's opening negative "I can manage that", a nice reversal. The effectiveness of the scene in suggesting Justin's anxiety or reservation about this trip is enhanced by the fact that as we do not yet quite know who these people are, we read the words and images as much for tone — I am thinking of the reserved precision with which Fiennes performs Justin's lines — as for narrative content.

The detail of the direction supports this reading. The opening shot is, clearly deliberately, lit so that the figures at first appear in almost complete shadow, outlined against the bright light of the outside. As the sequence concludes, Arnold and Tessa walk first into the light so that we and Justin briefly see them clearly, and we register the difference in race, that Arnold is black. We might suppose him to be an African or African American, though he will turn out to be neither. The two figures walk into brighter and brighter sun, and there is a sense of the difficulty of continuing to focus on them in the intensely strong outside light. Apart from the figure of Justin in the foreground, the screen fades almost to white before the cut. The feeling created is one of anxiety, expressed as the impossibility of seeing clearly.

We could call this the creation of a mood rather than of a piece of knowledge. The effect of it is that we read the subsequent flashbacks, such as the first meeting and the sexual encounter that follows it, and also perhaps the proposal scene, in the light of Justin's anxiety about Tessa's energy and directness; not just her erotic energy and directness, although certainly that too. The issue is that meeting Tessa's demands or needs — "Take me to Africa with you" — will not always be containable within the conventional structures (say, marriage) into which he channels them.

The subject is developed in a sequence in the Quayle home in Kenya, in which Meirelles juxtaposes two forms of data, Justin making an intimate recording with a webcam (of pregnant, naked Tessa in the bath) and a piece of paranoid evidence, his chancing on an email about a meeting in a hotel with Arnold. The film initiates a subject here that will be returned to: the observation that both these registers of our lives, the recording of intimacy and more public, or at least more routine data, are now matters that can be contained in, or consigned to, the memory of a computer. The discovery that the email has an innocent explanation relates to another point, that it is of the nature of paranoia that no explanation can be absolutely reassuring. However the local occasion is solved, the feeling that something must sooner or later be, or go, wrong remains with Justin.

The final sequence that I want to consider in this context takes place in Uhuru (i.e. the African) Hospital in Nairobi, where Tessa has insisted on having her baby. The opening configuration is for a moment puzzling. Tessa is suckling a newborn child whose skin is black, and Arnold and Justin sit either side of the hospital bed. The image seems to relate momentarily to the fantasy of adultery, as if we catch ourselves wondering for a moment if Arnold is the father of the baby, until an explanation is forthcoming. This is information that relates to the political plot. A few beds away is the baby's dying mother, an African teenager named Wanza Kilulu / Jacqueline Maribe, the victim of a piece of medical malpractice that is (to us, although

by this point not to Arnold and Tessa) still obscure.

Sandy arrives at the hospital bed, and a conversation takes place between him and Tessa in which she asks him to help her use the knowledge she has acquired about unsafe drug testing. He reassures her, promising to help "within reason". The conversation dramatises another element of the sexual currents that circulate around her, in Sandy's barely concealed desire. If Justin is anxious that he might turn out to be a Karenin to Tessa's Anna, then Sandy imagines himself as a Vronsky, the seductive lover claiming the right to rescue the beautiful, wilful woman from the repressive marriage.

It is impossible for Tessa, in her dealings with either Justin or Sandy, to free herself from the sexual feelings that are directed at her, whether those of paranoid love or those of lust, male fantasies about what she feels, or could be made to feel, for others. While she is alive, her knowledge of the drug testing conspiracy has a marginal function for the two men, but in neither case are they actually interested in what she knows. For Sandy it is a counter in the seduction he hopes to achieve, for Justin a part of her independence, of what he does not want to know about her, subordinate to his paranoia.

Tessa and Arnold write a report which Tessa, calling in the promise made in the hospital, has Sandy send to Pellegrin, the chief of the Africa desk at the Foreign Office. Learning that there is "no official response" but a personal letter to Sandy from Pellegrin, she strikes a bargain, agreeing to have sex with Sandy (in the future) in exchange for seeing the letter. In the event she steals it, an act that initiates the train of events ending in her murder. The importance of Tessa's sexual bargain is not to do with our view her virtue. It is a calculation, and it reflects the difficulty of moving her political knowledge out of a realm in which its function is in effect personal, into a context in which it might produce actual change. Only by strategically using this man's desire for her can she hope to bring it about.

The degree to which the political knowledge is submerged by a set of personal issues is underlined by a further document. After Tessa's murder, Justin finds another letter in her effects. We could call it, a letter about the letter; in it Sandy moves from upbraiding Tessa (for not just reading the letter from Pellegrin but stealing it) to declaring his love for her and asking her to run away with him.

The political knowledge, represented by the report which could expose the drug-testing regime, remains invisible. What has moved into the forefront are the more personal documents, the letters from Sandy and Pellegrin which are concerned with seducing or abusing Tessa, rather than the political issue. One further document that expresses a more functional link between personal feeling and the political — and thus acts as a kind of emblem of the transfer of knowledge from Tessa to Justin in the film — is the card that Wanza Kilulu's brother Kioko / Donald Apiyo leaves on Tessa's grave. The words of condolence are written on the reverse of a packet of the suspect drug Dypraxa.

A sequence immediately following Tessa's funeral demonstrates that for Justin at this point it is still the personal rather than the political issues that predominate. It is set in the garden of the Quayle house and carries a strong visual emphasis on screens and their removal, as if veils were being lifted: Justin asks Ghita whether Tessa and Arnold had been lovers, and she produces yet another kind of personal documentary

evidence, a snapshot of Arnold with his boyfriend.

The knowledge that Tessa was not an adulteress produces a decisive change in Justin. This is the last sequence in which we see him in his garden. Meirelles cuts sharply to the urban space of the Uhuru Hospital, and to a roomful of medical records, in which Justin is trying to trace Wanza Kilulu. This is the break between the two parts of the film, and initiates Justin's remaining actions, almost all of which are devoted to reassembling Tessa and Arnold's evidence of the political conspiracy and using the knowledge as he believes they would have done.

Part Two: The World without Desire

Why does a restored belief in Tessa's virtue produce this change? I suggest that this is not only a change in Justin's view of Tessa, but a transformation of his view of himself. He moves from a figure effectively disabled by his fantasies of his own inadequacy, to one who can reconstruct Tessa's investigative intelligence, while formulating a benign version of her, free of the currents of desire. While Tessa was alive, her needs and desires represented a possible threat. Once she is dead and the anxieties those desires gave rise to are dismissed, he becomes the ideal bereaved lover whose existence is devoted to her memory.

Just as the sexual desires and anxieties that circulated around Tessa determined the first half of the film, the second half presents a series of worlds characterised by the absence of desire. There are no lovers here – Justin will never again be in the presence of a sexually active couple. When he travels to London to unpick the conspiracy with the help of Tessa's cousin Ham / Richard McCabe and his son Guido / Rupert Simonian, the figure of Ham's wife is not included in the family scenes. It seems an odd omission but fits exactly the mood of this second part of the film, from which even the benign desires of others are excluded.

Justin seems to accept that he too will in all probability be killed as a result of trying to expose the conspiracy. The film does not seem to suggest that he acts out of any strong political conviction, or belief in reform. Rather his motive appears to be personal, the impulse "to finish what she started" that is part of the generically familiar motivation of the thriller hero who tries, if not to avenge the deaths of others, at least to complete their work.

As the setting shifts with Justin to London, Germany and finally back to Africa the film seems to move onto recognisable generic ground, of the thriller in which the investigator is surrounded by modern surveillance technologies, and in which questions about paranoid knowledge (say, which of these passers-by is truly a hired spy?) function enjoyably. Again what surfaces is the note that the computer randomly juxtaposes items intended for private and for public consumption; trawling the files on Tessa's computer produces the promotional film for KDH, the company that manufactures Dypraxa, which is compared by Ham to a trailer for a filmed blockbuster, and a movie of a different sort, the second webcam sequence, in which Tessa had filmed Justin as he awoke.

Justin finally retrieves Pellegrin's letter and the remaining copy of Tessa and Arnold's report. He then uses an old-fashioned device, one familiar in a world in which the investigator/hero is under threat of imminent death, of asking an acquaintance to post the evidence to a third party so it will be produced even following his murder.

What follows indicates the limited effect of his actions. The film uses the speech made by Ham at Justin's memorial service and the images set into it as a form of direct address to the audience. We are asked to recognise that while we may hope that individuals will be punished or disgraced, this is not the sort of exposure that brings down governments or corporations. Some worlds remain unaffected (an inset shot of Sandy at home) or effectively untouched (shots of the continued testing of Dypraxa, now licensed to a new company with a different name, in another African country). There is no sense that the operations of the drug companies are derailed, or even seriously interrupted.

This is more or less how John Le Carré's novel ends, with arguably a slightly more extensive discussion of how the English establishment buries inconvenient scandal. But there are further elements in the film, and I want to conclude by looking at some of these, which have no substantial originals in the novel.

The first is the raid by tribesmen that concludes the Southern Sudan sequence¹¹. This is the point at which the film, through the figure of Lorbeer / Pete Postlethwaite is articulating its most direct political critique. The context is a sequence which shows Western technologies and practices: aid planes, food drops. Tribal raiders suddenly appear in search of booty — "cattle, food, children" — and the cinematic presentation of this, the iconography of horsemen on a ridge, descending a slope, setting fire to the village, clearly suggests that these events are only a slightly modernised version (one with deadlier, Western, weapons) of a phenomenon that has existed for centuries. The argument is that at the level of the large scale actions Western intervention remains only marginally effective. At the level of the individual act, the point is made by Justin's failure to rescue a single female African child who climbs briefly onto the aid plane, and then flees back into the scrub. The sequence can be linked to Justin's memorial service in expressing the film's final positions about the politics of the public world.

Imagining Tessa

These sequences that I have just discussed are preceded and followed by moments in which Justin is alone and I want to move towards a conclusion by looking at them. The first is when Justin is driving away from Nairobi, to join the aid flight that will take him to the Sudan. As he travels alone across the countryside we flashback to Tessa travelling as a passenger in the car, making a home movie of him on a video camera and declaring her love for him. Of course the sequence is about loss, and connects with the poignancy of Tessa's movie of Justin that he discovered earlier on her computer. But the return to the motif, and more particularly the repetition of the act of making a film suggests a certain anxiety about the very closeness that the images claim to show. Perhaps these repeated recordings of intimacy, this accessible bank of ideal memories, constitute a way of providing reassurance that the couple need, or believe that they need, about their feeling for each other. This can be linked to the appearance of such material on the computer earlier, suggesting intimacy displaced, as it were.

The style of the shooting here, in which the making of the movie is juxtaposed with images of Tessa walking or standing which do not have any narrative function and which feel a little like clips from Tessa's video camera, is suggestive. It is as if

Justin's mind is running together an actual occasion, an image taken of it and viewed later, and an imagined image. This is picked up in the final sequence of the film, which is placed after the memorial service. We go back in time, to Justin alone on the shore of Lake Turkana, where Tessa died, waiting for his murderers to find him. He imagines Tessa's presence, and we see her sitting next to him. His last sentence is about knowledge; he tells her "I know all your secrets, Tess". His last word, in the penultimate shot of the film, is her name. This seems intended to be touching, but I think there is some case for a more reserved interpretation. For what Justin experiences is something posed, via these cinematic techniques, between memory and hallucination. There is a vague impression that he recalls past times with Tessa, but the predominant effect here is of his invoking a kind of ideal spirit of his wife, ever smiling, and silent. We might say, free of either the ability to express desire or of being the subject of it. It would be possible to read this as to some extent the Tessa that Justin has come to be able to accept, someone whose secrets are all known to him, which is distinctly not the woman that we saw in the first part of the film.

The final human image, as I have said, is a closeup of Justin, speaking Tessa's name. Rather than an unquestionable moment of romantic apotheosis we might consider it as a moment of irony, though it is not clear whether the film is in possession of the irony. Should we refer to what is probably the most famous story of white exploitation of Africa, one that involves the death of a man (a different kind of man, certainly) and the proposition that his last word was a woman's name? If we remember the story, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we will also remember that this detail is an untruth, the saving lie told to Kurtz's "Intended" when she asks Marlow for details of his death. If this thought occurs to us we might align the movie with Conrad's story, which offers the image of the total devotion of a bereaved lover but not in terms which carry the author's support, nor that of the teller of the tale. And just out of audible range, there is the lurking, horrific truth about the state of the continent. Does the film know this?

The choice of ending the film at Lake Turkana, rather than with shots of the children and the rubbish dumps of Kibera with which the political argument of the memorial service concludes, is expressive of the film's finally quietist political position. I have argued earlier that these films telling the stories of white women in Africa make much of issues of sterility and fertility, both of individuals and of the country itself. Lake Turkana is a suggestive image in these terms. The largest desert lake in the world, it appears sterile (volcanic and alkaline, as some shots of it here emphasise) but is paradoxically fertile. It is part of a complex ecosystem involving particularly bird-life, again annotated in the shots of flocks of birds that bookend the film. It seems to be the image of Kenya and of Africa with which Meirelles wants to leave us: something apparently unchanged over time, part of an extraordinary natural world, but one that is hostile to most human life. A single native figure with a spear is included in one of the shots, evidently the sole kind of man who is at home here. We could connect these images of the lake to those of the raiders that I discussed earlier. The film seems to wish to present an image of an Africa that is essentially unaffected by modernity, in terms of either social behaviour or landscape.

Commodities and Gifts

A final way to think about the nature of the world of *The Constant Gardener* is to focus on the motif of the gift. The two earlier films that I discussed are full of significant objects given and received, so much so that they could be said to structure those narratives. Caroline Link even ends *Nirgendwo in Afrika* with an image of a gift, to make a fundamental point about the difference between kinds of exchange. But in *The Constant Gardener*, though it is full of commodities, there are no successful gifts, no objects that speak of the transmission of life or its meaning with sufficient eloquence. The issue is raised twice. The first time is when, after their initial lovemaking, Justin tries to talk of sexual love as a "wonderful gift": Tessa hesitates, makes a response that ironises the sentiment, then laughs. The one explicit gift is directly associated with loss: Tessa hangs the mobile that she is given in Kibera over the cot that will never receive her baby. This may lead us to the African baby at Tessa's breast, whose name she says, means "blessing". For a moment the scene invites the thought of a gift, but the baby is returned to its village: just another orphan.

In conclusion I would say that the film successfully dramatises the possession of knowledge of a systemic conspiracy, but in the contemporary context of both the impenetrability of the public, political world, and the difficulty of constructing a satisfactory form of intimacy in the private one. The presentation of the differences between white and black experience of the city works well in the Nairobi and Kibera sequences, but as it moves to its close, the film seems tempted to retreat to an image of an Africa impervious to change.

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NOTES

1. Based on a novel of the same name by John Le Carré, and a screenplay by Jeffrey Caine. Produced by Simon Channing-Williams.
2. Isak Dinesen is the pseudonym of Karen Blixen, who published *Out of Africa* under her own name in 1937.
3. The Hollywood film that uses a related plot, looking at fears of adultery and a wife's giving birth to a surprisingly stillborn child is *Cass Timberlane* (George Sidney, 1947).
4. Given that this is a Hollywood film, it is not surprising that there are links here with myths of American history, and the image of the vanishing frontier. Elements of the hunter figure can be traced back through many variants to the figure of Leatherstocking in James Fenimore Cooper's novels.
5. See Chapter Four "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You" in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 123-124.
6. A sequence in which Justin travels to Canada in pursuit of knowledge of the conspiracy was cut before theatrical release. It is included as a deleted scene on the DVD release.
7. The exodus of white families from sub-Saharan Africa has been the subject of recent journalistic comment and analysis in the UK: see for example Jason Cowley in *The Observer*, 16th April 2006.
8. The words are Le Carré's. See *The Constant Gardener*, London: Hodder, 2005, p.131.
9. A comment on exactly this contrast is made in Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*, London: Verso, 2006. Quoting Jeevan Vasagar in the London *Guardian*, he compares the leafy Nairobi suburb of Karen with parts of Kibera – respectively 360 and 80,000 inhabitants per square kilometer.
10. This is the film's innovation. The novel begins at the High Commission, with the news of the murders.
11. In the novel Justin makes the same journey to retrieve the documents that will expose the conspiracy, but there is no raid.

"What you see is happening right now."

THERMAGEDDON AND A SEARCH FOR TOMORROW

BY BLAIR MILLER

"The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

—Roger "Verbal" Kint, *The Usual Suspects*

The question hangs over anyone concerned with the broad malaise of contemporary society: How does one fight back against an entity able to turn revolution on its head? Resistance is not futile, but it must be complex and overly conscientious. Care must be taken with regards to the ways that those shaping public discourse and popular culture co-opt said resistance and sap away its meaning. In

the case of full-blown hegemony the power structure even uses the tomes of resistance for its own benefit. Failure to heed the hegemonic forces that succeed in shaping our everyday lives can result in acts of revolt that not only fall upon deaf ears but also get transmogrified into something that in the end further serves the goals of those in power, blinding others to their very existence.

Conceived and championed by deeply integrated members of the rich ruling class, Hollywood blockbuster films often serve as case studies for hegemony. Virtually any dissident issue these films

purport to address is turned against itself to the extent that said issue is softened and made meaningless for the viewer. Viewers leave feeling as though the issue at hand is not of great consequence, reminding us of the Devil's greatest trick. This phenomenon is *itself* of high importance. More than perhaps any other popular culture artefacts, films – especially the blockbusters, and the socialites who spawn them – stand as either highly sanguine or deeply lobotomizing, depending on the film. Within Hollywood the latter wins out ever increasingly. As privileged members of such an auspicious group, the task ahead of filmmakers like Roland Emmerich, the director of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) is to maintain a pathological machine designed to articulate and uphold social conventions, in no small part by debasing, trivializing, depoliticizing or exaggerating potentially subversive subject matter. The films which arise from this process do so under the guise of what is all too sheepishly called art (with all its assertive and perhaps anaesthetizing



characteristics), further complicating the relationship between blockbuster films and the elite class which they help to keep safely rich, and richly safe.

The Day After Tomorrow stands as an exemplar of the Hollywood blockbuster's hegemonic force. Emmerich's film shows that the breadth of Hollywood hegemony includes the fight against global warming. The film examines several groups of Americans (and one trio of Irishmen) as the world is ambushed by the environmental outcome of global warming – an outcome which any self-respecting and conscientious climatologist fears is looming on our proverbial horizon. The global crisis takes place at a fantastically accelerated rate during the film, surely killing millions of inhabitants of the Northern Hemisphere as tidal waves, floods, multiple tornados, killer hail and other calamitous climate incidents leave the survivors struggling against the impending lethally cold weather that sweeps in. The overarching storm is the event that ushers in a new Ice Age. Though the events that shape thermageddon – a term coined by

environmental activist and inaugural chairman of Greenpeace Robert Hunter which indicates both the role of global warming within current environmental trends and the impending severity of it should humanity do nothing to lessen our role in it – happen within a time span of several days in Fox studios' blockbuster, the science behind *how* it comes about does, for the better part, adhere to prevailing scientific theories about potential global warming effects.¹ As an isolated narrative, *The Day After Tomorrow* comes off as emotional, traumatic, and even thought-provoking about the severity of global-warming. Watching the film, however, is another story. Though the film concerns an impending crisis for Americans and (as an afterthought) the world which begs thought, discussion and action, it is all too easy to forget – especially while viewing it – that *The Day After Tomorrow* is a film about global warming. It adheres to several maxims – speed, a formulaic narrative, and an overemphasis upon personal perspectives – which are

symptomatic of a film that uses the very seriousness of a subversive issue to hold said issue at arm's length. In other words, *The Day After Tomorrow* actually makes it *more* difficult for the viewer to access possible thermageddon on a meaningful level.

In Hunter's book, *2030 – Confronting Thermageddon In Our Lifetime*, 2030 signifies the year in which Hunter and countless respected scientists believe that the climate change induced by global warming will reach a threshold whereby the impacts will be irreversible. Even more frightening than such a close date (can any realistic and informed individual *truly* see the leaders of capitalism reversing their ways within the next two decades?) are the points in 2030 at which Hunter points out that all the scientific projections around this date are supported by projection models and contingencies that fail to include certain atmospheric variables which may speed up the process within the coming years. With *The Day After Tomorrow*, Emmerich accelerates this climate process even



further, unavoidably bringing the narrative along with it. Any sequence that is not a hyperbolic effects and action scene never lasts longer than three minutes; the film sequences themselves rush by as though swept up in its own storm. The characters in turn end up being shallow and distant, the editing is frenetic, and the matter of a narrative of impending climate change exists as afterthought.

Emmerich takes an issue of huge importance that warrants substantial discourse and submerges it under the rushing tide of *The Day After Tomorrow*, blurring the concern and making it difficult to ponder. In a meeting with the President of the United States during which climatologist Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) solemnly declares that the people left in the northern states are trapped ("it's too late for them. If they go outside, the storm will kill them. At this point, their best chance is to stay inside, try and ride it out . . . pray."), the film waits all of two seconds before rushing off to a sequence after the meeting in which Jack is rushing down a hallway on his way to make preparations for a quickly-planned three-man excursion through the storm and towards Manhattan to try and save his trapped son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal). The viewer is now focused upon how much time Sam has left, while the massive loss of lives due to multiple and widespread climate disasters in the film should serve as a point of contemplation for viewers about what may happen to our planet if we fail to revolutionize our lifestyles. During Jack's risky trip, his lifelong colleague Frank Harris (Jay O. Sanders) dies by falling through the glass ceiling of a shopping mall buried in the snow over which he, Jack and Adam (Dash Mihok) unknowingly traverse. Hanging by a rope connected to his two coworkers, Frank cuts himself free in order to prevent the whole trio from falling through the ceiling. Frank's death is not shown onscreen. He merely severs the rope, and the film immediately cuts to Jack's bewildered face as he watches his old friend fall to his death. This prevents the viewer from having any sutured experience with the death, a distancing move strengthened by the following sequence when Adam and Jack are in their tent later that night. Adam pours out some cups for the two to drink out of and three cups fall into view. After a pause,

Adam grimly puts one cup back in his backpack. It should be a touching scene, but like Jack's comment to the president, there is but seconds of contemplation allowed the viewer before the film cuts to another location and other characters. The frustrating thing about *The Day After Tomorrow* and so many other blockbuster films is that while characters abound throughout the film, almost every one developed beyond the status of a mere dialogue extra, the majority of them are either killed off or left behind in the tidal wave that is generic narrative, reducing the film to a sort of melodramatic diarrhoea – a pell-mell mess of characters, events and sequences that begin to illicit emotion, and then are quickly swept away in order to make room for the next mess.

Frank could have survived and the following narrative would have been unaffected. There is no action following Frank's death that makes his death worthwhile, such as a depletion of supplies for the rescuers. Why, then, *did* Frank die? The sacrifice of a secondary character in order to further the life of the protagonist is a common narrative device in Hollywood blockbusters. This is but one of the drab, formulaic aspects of the narrative of *The Day After Tomorrow*. Jack, of course, is a harsh, speak-his-mind expert who is so obsessed with his job that his relationship with his son has deteriorated. Sam is trapped in Manhattan because he joined a school club in order to get closer to a girl, Laura (Emmy Rossum) he has fallen for – as pointed out by his black sidekick, Brian (Arjay Smith). Until the crisis forces them closer, Laura has no idea how Sam feels and once the two finally share their feelings Laura becomes critically ill. *The Day after Tomorrow* is a film characterized by characterization and by framing the issue of global warming within such a typical and formula-laden narrative, any informative message is rendered meaningless.

Nevertheless, it is the role of several characters within the film – archetypes though they may be – that form the weak cohesion it needs to survive as a narrative. There are two points at which *The Day After Tomorrow* threatens to ponder pressing questions about humanity and its role in the degradation of the environment. How the film ends up trivializing the issue by offering highly per-

sonal and dramatic answers gives an indication of the problematic of personalizing global concerns with melodrama. In a private moment, Laura – an academic overachiever – confesses having huge difficulty adjusting to the consequences of global warming and the fact that all of her aspirations now amount to "preparation for a future that no longer exists." Laura tells Sam that he was right to make light of her intense approach to academics contests, because, now, "It's all for nothing." Instead of being a voice for the film which would address the hard questions about global warming and its *undeniable* significance upon our present-day lives, Sam responds by saying that his making fun of Laura was only to hide the truth – that he joined her in academic contests only to try and get closer to her. Upon hearing this, Laura leans forward and kisses Sam – with a burning fireplace in the background for effect. The only comfort *The Day After Tomorrow* can offer in response is more melodrama. Later on, as the last stages of the era-changing storm are playing out Adam asks Jack – the scientific voice within the film – what he thinks will become of civilization after this climate shift is over. Jack responds, "Mankind survived the last Ice Age. We're certainly capable of surviving this one. It all depends on whether or not we're able to learn from our mistakes. I sure as hell'd like a chance to learn from mine." Jack then indicates that he was referring to his deteriorated relationship with Sam. Again, *The Day After Tomorrow* breaches a potentially contemplative moment only to cover it over with more melodrama – in this case, the nostalgic power of the nuclear family.

Both such dialogue responses amount to a skirting of the issue. The film has taken pressing thoughts and replaced them with the distraction of an appeal to people's personal lives in a way that uses concerns about global warming against itself. Personal lives are always intertwined with public consequences and as such we should be more aware of our *collective* lifestyles and what they are doing to the planet. However, *The Day After Tomorrow* mitigates the consequential aspects with personal melodramas, obscuring the matter at hand by examining it solely *through* the personal. This sort of move calls to mind films like *The Matrix* trilogy, where scores upon scores

of anonymous – and often unseen – people are killed in what should be catastrophes, yet these deep tragedies are mere background noise for the personal drama that serves as the film's melodramatic narrative. This is a dangerous game that blockbusters play given that the significance of personal actions upon greater society is already manipulated and obfuscated for the public through other forms of mainstream media. The intensely personal issue of the safety of the traditional family and all of life's characters that help to threaten-cum-protect it like rhythms of consonance and dissonance in music are more palatable than environmental disaster, and they thusly win out over consideration for the future of our planet. The gravitas of drastic climate changes stemming from global warming intertwines cleanly and deeply with maxims that form key parts of the blockbuster formula, showing the sick serendipity that power enjoys through hegemony. Removing deep importance from a social issue by *transferring* this importance onto personal melodrama is an addiction of everyday life justified by the blockbuster film.

As its own end result of personalizing and dramatizing the public, *The Day After Tomorrow* creates a reckless sense of typical triumph at the end of the film. This is because most of the principal characters survive the initial storm. At one point, a survivor in the library, Bob (Kenneth Moskow), clings to a book he claims as the original Gutenberg bible and mentions that it "represents the dawn of the age of reason" and that "if western civilization is finished, I'm going to save at least one little piece of it." But the message of the film is that western civilization *does* survive.ⁱⁱ While viewers watch Laura cuddle up with Sam in a helicopter as he looks lovingly at his rescuer, Jack, they are reassured of both the reuniting of the nuclear family and the likely perpetuation of it. During the final sequence of the film other groups of survivors are visible on Manhattan rooftops, as – on a personal and melodramatic level – triumph dominates the sequence. Now, why is it, again, that the world is covered in snow?

"This can't be real"

—Gil Scott-Heron, *Did You Hear What They Said?*

This chorus evokes a dissociative appeal to surrealism in the face of overwhelming human consequences. The same desperate remark could be used in reference to humankind's current 'watershed generation,' mostly unwitting members within the contemporary era who are *undeniably* able to make important choices concerning the future of the global environment as global warming and the human component helping to propel it force upon us terrifyingly difficult decisions. The title of this essay is a line uttered by a news anchor during *The Day After Tomorrow* as she reports one of the multiple weather disasters that kills thousands. Indeed, global warming is happening before our very eyes. While the same mainstream media that holds evidence of global warming at arm's length also prints *Newsweek* cover articles about the 'Greening of America' in celebration of the supposed heightened awareness Americans have towards environmental matters, their inconsistent scepticism betrays a shrewd denial of the issue at hand. As such, carbon emissions continue to rise around the world and we grow ever closer to the deadly turning point Robert Hunter and his brethren are trying to warn the world about. In other words, it is real, and it *is* happening. *Right now.*

This was not, by any means, a democratic choice; our current stranglehold over the environment is the bi-product of an unaware and uneducated public and highly private, narrow-minded decisions continually made by members of a deeply exclusive and self-perpetuating fraternity within the global upper class. Entangled within this close-knit, yet amorphous enclave is the Hollywood film industry, with what has come to be known as the blockbuster film strengthening the core of the relationship between film and propaganda for big business. As long as this remains the case, blockbuster films about subversive standpoints will only be permitted to use that revolutionary energy to further capitalist causes. After all, as Hunter puts it when trying to explain why Newfoundland fishermen knowingly fished whole species to the brink of extinction, there are mortgages to be paid. The mortgages in Hollywood are large indeed.

Despite the hegemony of the system that the film exemplifies, the namesake of *The Day After Tomorrow* is still up for

grabs. Underneath all of the despondent cynicism and fearful re-iterations on either side of the matter, the arguments in and around global warming may still be open-ended. One of the initial tasks for the average filmgoing audience is to at least see through the propaganda of Hollywood and still consider it an issue at all. To coin Scott-Heron's most famous song, if we do not try and seep through Hollywood hegemony – and hegemony everywhere – the revolution *will* be televised, and like the emphasis on personal melodrama in *The Day After Tomorrow*, all we will care about is if "Dick got down with Jane on *Search for Tomorrow*." Scott-Heron again puts it well in "A Sign of the Ages":

**It's a sign of the ages,
Markings on my mind
Man at the crossroads,
At odds with an angry sky.
There can be no salvation,
There can be no rest.
Until all old customs
Are put to the test.**

Those we carelessly trust police a network of social systems that takes attempts for change and uses them for its own benefit. This state of affairs is not a call to succumb; it is a reason to redouble efforts, to put things to the test and viewing popular films with an ever-critical eye is no exception.

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NOTES

1. In 1996, even one of the top officers of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was quoted in newspapers, saying "For the first time, I feel confident in saying there's a human component," to current warming trends. Robert Hunter, *2030 - Confronting Thermageddon In Our Lifetime* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2000), 54. For anyone even remotely aware of our use of carbon-based fuels and how they relate to global warming, the human element is obvious, and shall be assumed in this paper. Others who wish to deny our obvious – and scientifically supported! – role in the current environmental demise on Earth do so not or at their own peril, but at the peril of all.
2. American survivors are now an enormous mass of refugees displaced to Mexico, a possibility only made real by the forgiving of all third-world debt by the U.S. Once again, it represents a sound opportunity to address complex global issues both in and around global warming and global capitalism, but the film treats it as a mere afterthought.

Good Night, and Good Luck

HISTORY REPLAYS ITSELF

BY RICHARD LIPPE

Good Night, and Good Luck is the first mainstream film to respond to the consequences of 9/11 and the Bush administration's reaction to it. George Clooney, who directed, co-wrote and co-stars in the film, takes an indirect approach to present day concerns, using a 1954 televised confrontation between newscaster Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy to address two major issues: 1) civil liberties; 2) the media, specifically television. The Murrow-McCarthy exchange of words neatly combines both these issues. In the immediate post WW II period, McCarthy used Cold War fears, particularly the threat of Communist infiltration into American society through the government, education and the entertainment industry, to keep the public on edge over national security. Using the House Un-American Activities Committee as his base, he became, as its chairman, the most celebrated and feared government official in America, hunting down individuals who he claimed were Communists or involved in subversive activities. McCarthy's tactics were intimidation and the inducing of fear, making often outrageous accusations with little or no

regard for the consequences of his claims. In the name of patriotism, McCarthy destroyed lives and mounted a powerful assault on civil liberties. What he did in the early 1950s finds its echo in George W. Bush's post 9/11 on-going war on terror that included from the outset making civil liberties secondary to the government's protection of its citizens. While McCarthy had instilled fear into the media (anyone who challenged his credibility was labelled a Communist or pro-Communism), the Bush administration attempts to use the mainstream media, which has been predominantly willing to support the government whatever it says, to shape public opinion in its favour. And, Bush, like McCarthy, uses fear to keep the American public under his sway.

Good Night, and Good Luck is an inspired piece of socially responsible filmmaking. Taking an incident from what is considered a dark period in recent American history as his subject matter, Clooney addresses a significant aspect of the political climate of contemporary America and does so without needing to belabour his point. But *Good Night, and Good Luck* isn't merely a film

with a clever concept. It is an intelligent and graceful combining of politics, art and entertainment. I want to briefly comment below on the film's aesthetics, its mise-en-scene, structure and performances.

Clooney shot *Good Night, and Good Luck* in black and white. His primary reason for doing so was that he decided to use archival footage of Joseph McCarthy instead of having an actor play the senator. The film includes footage of McCarthy interrogating a witness during a House Un-American Activities Committee session and his appearance on "See It Now" in which he responds to an earlier show in which Murrow challenges his tactics and motives. Clooney, in interviews¹, says that he didn't want an actor playing McCarthy because he felt it was better if the viewer had direct access to the senator's presence and persona. The strategy works very well as McCarthy is, in his own way, a fascinating figure, being in equal measure forceful and nervously hesitant, sincere and sinister, transparent and manipulative. And, in using McCarthy himself, the film provides an accurate record of his ideas and politics.

While the kinescope footage of McCarthy adds to the film's recreation of the 1950s, the film's black and white photography aids in evoking the period in other ways. It references the aesthetic of the documentary film which was, until the 1970s, dominated by black and white photography. Similarly, television programs were broadcast, with rare exceptions, in black and white as colour sets were very expensive at the time. Clooney judiciously reinforces the film's connections to documentary film and television respectively through the staging of scenes and their framing. For instance, the film's opening sequence, which is set on October 25, 1958, the occasion being a testimonial dinner for Edward R. Murrow, is shot and edited in a cinema-verite style; the guests, that include, as the viewer soon discovers, his colleagues, are shown interacting in a seemingly spontaneous manner. As the sequence progresses, the pacing slows down and the "A Salute to Edward R. Murrow" begins with Sig Mickelson/Jeff Daniels, a CBS employee, providing a concise summary of Murrow's connections to CBS and his broadcasting accomplishments. Murrow is introduced backstage, waiting in the wings and about to address his audience, in a striking close-up profile shot. Close-up shots of Murrow reoccur throughout the film. These have a dual function: In addition to privileging his



status in the narrative, they mirror his television screen image which was most often seen in close-up.

Good Night, and Good Luck uses the testimonial dinner as a framing device. The event is notable not only as a tribute to him by his peers, but also for the speech he delivered. In it, Murrow warns that television is at the crossroads, still capable of providing informative and intelligent programming but on the brink of becoming merely escapism, a means to distract and isolate the viewer. As he concludes his sentence, a close-up of Murrow fades to black and in its place an inter-title appears, reading 'CBS Studios – New York, October 14, 1953'. Next, Diane Reeves is heard on the sound track singing "TV Is The Thing This Year" and the camera is positioned in an elevator, filled with staff members arriving on the job. There is imposed over the image two short statements: The first says that Americans were 'overwhelmed' by the threat of Communism in the 1940s and 1950s; the second tells us that Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed over two hundred Communists had infiltrated the government but that the press was afraid to react, fearing being a target itself. On the completion of the narrative proper, a dissolve is used to return to Murrow's 1958 speech, still in progress. Murrow, now concluding the entire speech, is shown in a close-up and then walks out of the frame, leaving the screen black until the end credits begin to role. This final close-up of Murrow works as a form of punctuation, effectively and eloquently summarizing Clooney's evocative use of the close-up.

The introductory framing sequence uses low-key lighting which is justified by the atmosphere created by the candle-lit dinner environment. The lighting creates high contrast and gives the seemingly candid images a strong definition. (These images, as still photographs, could have appeared in a copy of a then popular 'current events' news magazine such as *Life* or *Look* magazine.) While Clooney is here again relating the imagery to the period, *Good Night, and Good Luck* isn't stylistically mannered, self-consciously attempting to create a feeling of nostalgia for the viewer. The film is fluid in its editing and use of camera movement. This is evident particularly in the scenes depicting the studio work space of Murrow and his colleagues. While the film is shot solely on interior sets and mainly in constricting spaces, its imagery never becomes claustrophobic. And the pacing is

finely tuned to the drama of the events unfolding, particularly in the depiction of the broadcasting of "See It Now", both the behind-the-scenes preparation and on-air experience.

Being set in the New York City of the 1950s and given Murrow's air of sophistication, it seems appropriate that jazz music is used throughout the film. Dianne Reeves, whose presence suggests the likes of Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan, is heard and/or seen periodically although she has no direct connection to the narrative itself. Instead, her songs serve as commentary (at times ironic), and aid in giving the film continuity as it is essentially a series of set pieces. Additionally, the songs and their interpretations heighten the film's somewhat elegiac mood. To his credit, Clooney doesn't use pop songs of the day on the soundtrack, a practice that, since Martin Scorsese introduced the concept with *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1968), has become a cliché. If the film is influenced by Scorsese's work it is his *Raging Bull* (1980), with which it stylistically shares, in addition to the black and white photography, a present/past framing device, an episodic narrative and the use of inter-titles to identify time changes as the narrative evolves; and, McCarthy, like Jake La Motta, is a driven, attention-getting and paranoid human being.

Reeves' presence is one strategy the film uses to make the viewer think; another example is found in its fast pacing and introduction to numerous characters at the beginning of the October 14, 1953, segment. The viewer needs to pay attention to the characters to find out who they respectively are, their function and what is being said in the dialogue exchanges taking place. Clooney, while using cutting and camera movement to visually engage, is, from the outset, making language equally relevant. The film is, after all, dealing with, in the presences of Murrow and McCarthy, words and ideas.

Whereas Senator Joseph McCarthy appears through the use of kinescope footage, Edward R. Murrow is played by David Strathairn who, in addition to having a physical resemblance to Murrow, captures his professional presence and persona. But *Good Night, and Good Luck* places its political concerns over the biographical film. In fact, it adheres to what McCarthy says in his opening comments on the "See It Now" program in which he responds to Murrow's criticism; that is, what is at stake in their

conflict is not the individual but issues. There is no attempt to 'humanize' Murrow in a conventional sense by providing, for instance, access to his personal life. Yet Strathairn, with his humanity and intelligence, creates an engaging and complex characterization.

By placing emphasis on Murrow's measured and responsible behaviour, the film reinforces his personality differences from McCarthy, who thrives on emotionalism. On the other hand, *Good Night, and Good Luck* points out that their respective destinies simultaneously converge: Murrow, because of his decision to challenge McCarthy through his "See It Now" program, loses his status at CBS and, in effect, initiates the downfall of his television career; McCarthy, because of his ever aggressive assault on ferreting out Communists in America, oversteps his powers in taking on the Pentagon and, on live television, in the course of a 1954 investigative hearing into his misuse of authority, is stripped of his stature and power. In showing a kinescope of Army counsel Joe Welch reducing an earlier seen bullying McCarthy to a pathetic, simpering figure, the film provides a dramatic moment that is in itself disturbing and complex, on both a political and personal level.

Good Night, and Good Luck keeps a tight focus on the Murrow-McCarthy confrontation. The film's other major characters include Fred Friendly/George Clooney, William Paley/Frank Langella, Joe Wershba/Robert Downey Jr., Shirley Wershba/Patricia Clarkson and Don Hollenbeck/Ray Wise. Of these characters, Joe and Shirley Wershba are the least significant. The characters are the closest the film comes to providing viewer identification figures. In part this occurs because they are given a personal life, including scenes that take place in their home. Both Joe and Shirley work for CBS (he is part of Murrow's staff) and, because the company policy prohibits the hiring of a married couple, they aren't allowed to be open about their marriage on the job. Although the workplace regulation adds to the film's period flavour (another instance in which 'exposure' will lead to loss of job), their situation doesn't seem sufficiently meaningful to warrant the footage it is given. The Wershbas are the most 'ordinary' of the principal characters and least central to the narrative. In contrast, William Paley and Don Hollenbeck contribute directly to the film's dramatic weight. Paley, the head of CBS and

Murrow's employer, becomes increasingly uncomfortable about the controversial situation in which the network is being placed because of Murrow's attack on McCarthy. From Paley's perspective, what is at stake is the network's alienation of their advertisers and the function of commercial television. Paley, while having respect for Murrow, both professionally and personally, refuses to be swayed by Murrow's claims that, in taking on McCarthy, he remains within the job description of a news reporter. Ultimately, it is Paley who is responsible for ending Murrow's longstanding relationship with the network. Whereas Paley is and remains a powerful figure, Hollenbeck, a nightly newscaster for CBS (and a colleague of Murrow's) who has been identified publicly as a 'pinko', has become, because of the pressures this has placed upon him, a defenceless and despairing figure. In the film's most intimate moment, Hollenbeck, in the only shot of him in private, is seen in his kitchen turning on the gas burners as he is about to commit suicide. Hollenbeck is the film's most sympathetic character. Because he has been 'outed' as being pro-Communist, he becomes an isolated figure; even Murrow is cautious about being associated with him as he is well-aware that it will be used against him, another way to claim that he has, like Hollenbeck, Communist leanings. With Hollenbeck, the film points to the tragic consequences of the oppressive environment McCarthy and his supporters created in the name of defending democracy.

Fred Friendly, producer of and collaborator on "See It Now", is presented as working in total unison with Murrow whether it is providing support when the latter is about to go on-air, or in dealing with the Pentagon when it attempts to block Murrow's broadcast on the dismissal of Milo Radulovich, an airman who was discharged from the armed forces without a trial on the grounds that his family were Communist sympathizers. Yet Friendly is the film's most unobtrusive character; he most often is seen as being thoughtful, committed and responsible. Clooney, the film's one box-office asset, in casting himself in the role, is effacing his identity as a leading man. Not only does the casting and his performance illustrate Clooney's willingness to serve the project, it also indicates his refusal to provide the film with a 'hero' figure. Clooney's on screen presence isn't used, by association, to give charisma to Strathairn's Murrow, an appealing but somewhat

reserved figure. Clearly, the film isn't being offered as a conventional tale of a hero defeating a villain with a happy-ever-after ending. Any such notion is undermined by the presentation of Murrow's defeat in the film's past (what he represents and stands for causes him to lose "See It Now") and present (his warnings about the descent of television programming into mind-numbing entertainment, as we know, were ignored).

Despite its seriousness of purpose, *Good Night, and Good Luck* has a sense of humour. Some of it comes from wry dialogue exchanges (about to go on-air with his McCarthy program, Murrow receives a telephone call from Paley; Paley: "There's a Knickerbocker game tonight. I've got front row seats. Are you interested?"; Murrow: "I'm a little busy bringing down the network tonight, Bill"), but the film's funniest moment occurs when Murrow interviews Liberace on his "Person to Person" show. Murrow inquires if he has any plans to marry, to which Liberace responds by telling him about his friend Princess Margaret, saying that she is looking for the right man and that he, too, hopes to be successful in his search. On a darker level, the film includes two commercials featured on "See It Now". The first is for Kent cigarettes which shamelessly flatters the viewer who is told that, in watching the program, he or she is intelligent, has a discerning nature and will therefore smoke the finest cigarette available. (In *Good Night, and Good Luck* almost everyone is smoking and Murrow was, as seen in the film, a very heavy smoker; he died eventually from lung cancer, giving the ad a grimly sinister meaning that it couldn't have had in the mid-1950s.) The second commercial shown is sponsored by Alcoa. Earlier in the film, it is mentioned that the aluminum company might object to any negative on-air comments about the Pentagon as it has a contact with the government. But the Alcoa ad aired is noble and self-effacing, celebrating the American farmer who, with Alcoa's help (supplying the metal needed to build grain silos), feeds the country.

Good Night, and Good Luck is a bold and audacious film. To begin, shooting in black and white limited its commercial potential. Grant Heslov, the film's producer and co-writer, and George Clooney took a big risk in making a film centred on Edward R. Murrow, early television and the political climate of the 1950s Cold War years. The film is consistently intelligent and maintains its integrity, refusing to exploit its subject mat-

ter or dumb it down to appeal to the contemporary viewer. In addition, it is remarkable in its skill in turning history into a work that is in part essay and in part dramatic storytelling. Clooney, to fully draw attention to the political connections between the environment of 1950s America and the present day, reconstructs the period. (*Good Night, and Good Luck* could have been made conceivably using solely archival footage. But as a documentary film, it would have retained stronger ties to its historical origins and lessened its contemporary significance.)

From another perspective, the film provides David Strathairn with a role that gives him the opportunity to illustrate his extraordinary talent. Strathairn's performance is a highly original and creative piece of acting that deserves more recognition than it received. Strathairn convincingly enacts a real-life personality and makes Murrow into an iconic-like presence. In addition, Robert Elswit's elegant black and white photography is essential to the film's success. It is both a thing of beauty in itself and provides the film, in the recreation of the look of cinema-verite footage, with a tone and atmosphere ideally suited to its subject matter and era. *Good Night, and Good Luck* deservedly received each of its six Academy Award nominations (it was nominated in the categories of best picture, director, male lead performance, original screenplay, art direction and cinematography). Considering what he accomplished with the film, it isn't surprising that Clooney seemed a bit dissatisfied Oscar night when receiving his award as Best Supporting Actor for *Syriana*.

As *Good Night, and Good Luck* proclaims, the issue of civil liberties, the media and 'news' reporting are today, as they were fifty years ago, of the utmost importance to a democratic society. In using the Murrow-McCarthy confrontation, the film foregrounds a complex issue about the function of reportage and objectivity. It challenges notions of total objectivity, recognizing the importance of the subjective self but also the need for reason and clear thinking. And, it reminds the viewer that in America, when it comes to defending the rights of the individual, there is a difference between, as Murrow says in the film, dissent and disloyalty.

NOTES

1. J. Hoberman, "Celebrity Journalist", *Village Voice*, October 5 -11, 2005, p.32; Graham Fuller and Ali Jaafa, "Clooney: Confessions of a dangerous mind", *Sight&Sound*, March, 2006, pp. 14 - 20.

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